



# Volo's Guide to BALDUR'S GATE II



# **Volo's Guide to Baldur's Gate II**

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Based on the original DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® game by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson.

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# Welcome, and Warning



ell, I'm back. Or was.

Some of you know me: Volothamp Gedarm, scribe and traveler without peer,

expert on more realms than most folk ever see, let alone know, and gourmet, to boot<sup>1</sup>.

It was my intent in this guide to thoroughly explore the coasts of Amn and Tethyr (Athkatla, the City of Coin, in particular), and I embarked on this task with gusto. To my regret, I met with reverse after setback. Armies of monsters, legal misunderstandings, escapes from misdirected justice, and a dastardly trick played by evil mages doomed and confounded me.

## My Doom

Now (as a public service, you understand) let me write of the misfortune that befell me. Magic is hated, feared, and yet covertly coveted in Amn. Nowhere is this more evident than in the crowded, ruthlessly competitive cauldron of wealth that is Athkatla. This isn't to say mages aren't to be found here—just that

they work in secret, and guard their lore and doings even more jealously than wizards elsewhere.

I was able to roam nearby coastal lands and countryside more or less at will, with the exceptions of local perils (in the Swordbelt in particular). In Athkatla, however, unbeknownst to me, I was recognized by mages seeking to destroy or maim me for what they see as an attack on their power: the publication of my long-suppressed work *Volo's Guide To All Things Magical*. Despite the fact that I removed some truly personal wizards' information from that work, and regardless of the firm and inescapable fact that Mystara desires that magical lore be distributed as widely as possible, these mages view me as their foe.

They cast a spell upon me while I was in the Copper Coronet. At all times when I'm in Athkatla or within sight of its walls, I'm cloaked in a many-layered illusion that has thus far foiled all attempts to remove it<sup>2</sup>, and portrays me as a robed mage bristling with rings and rods and amulets, all of them bright with the

<sup>1</sup>You can add liar, boaster, trickster, and swindler extraordinaire to the list, if we can deal with truths for a moment. The part about "gourmet, to boot" is true, though; several gourmets to my knowledge have given him the boot.—Elminster of Shadowdale, here to drop a few notes of sanity into Volo's ever-rushing song.

<sup>2</sup>Elminster: I think it rather suits ye, and is, ahem, wholly fitting to thy crime.



radiance of magic being unleashed. The illusion led to repeated attacks on my person, until I was forced to flee the city by night, swimming in its noisome harbor. I barely escaped with my life. I hope someday to return and survey the glories of the City of Coin properly in print, but for now this text will have to do.

## A Word from Elminster

Many folk of discernment ask me why I continue to edit Volo's scribblings about places he's visited.

I can only reply that one loves Volo's "ramblings about ramblings" the way one loves a dog of uncertain parentage. Sure, it's a mangy dog, infested with fleas and covered with scars from fights it was too dumb to avoid. One loves such a dog because no one else will. So it is with Volo's doggerel.

You'll find much entertainment

in these pages—doubly so if you've already visited the locations mentioned herein. If Volo is the master of anything, it is the unintentionally hilarious. I've edited out most of the completely nonsensical, but I've left a few choice inaccuracies to give a sense of the author's authenticity.

I'm told that many from your world, lately of Baldur's Gate, are eager to travel the streets and alleyways of Athkatla. I know what you're seeking—hints!—and you'll find only the faintest of clues here. But the best way to solve a mystery is to immerse yourself in your surroundings.

And Volo does that better than anyone, I'd wager—though he often finds extraction more difficult than immersion.

Enjoy thy travels, readers, and  
gods grant ye luck!



—Elminster of  
Shadowdale

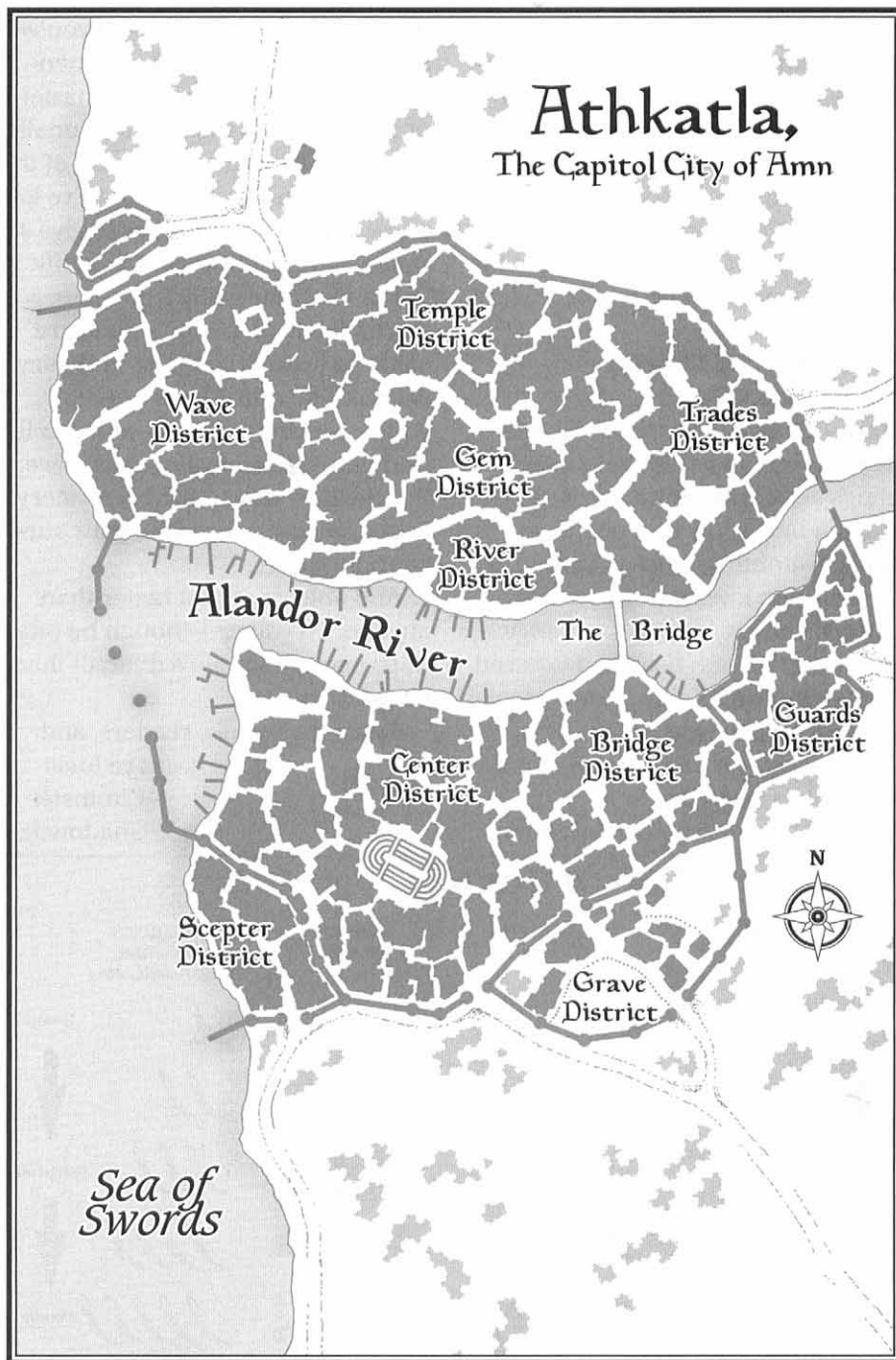
## Volo's Ratings System

	Pipes (Inns)	Tankards (Taverns)	Coins (Prices)	Daggers (Alleyways, Courtyards, etc.)	
Worst					Unsafe
↓					↓
Better					Dangerous
↓					↓
Best					Deadly



# Athkatla,

The Capitol City of Amn





# Athkatla

## The City of Coin



he glittering capital and oldest city of Amn is a place where money rules and business never sleeps. The

wharves along the Alandor River are busy day and night, and only the wealthiest citizens can afford to rise late in the morning and retire from trade matters in the early evening. The visitor will find Athkatla a pit of steep costs, ever-present fees, and hard-driving entrepreneurs pushing and shoving for business.

Everyone has money, everything costs money and more money, and the display of wealth is everything. To the poor visitor, Athkatla can be harsh and frightening; to the "born merchant," exciting and inspiring.

Thieves who use written agreements are more common here than elsewhere in Faerûn, extending the bustle of Amn's commerce even to their activities.

For the weak, the lost, and the overwhelmed, Athkatla can be a dangerous place. Daring to dabble in local politics, or making any remark about the Council of Six or the Shadow Thieves, can be swiftly fatal. Assume agents of these two groups—and countless ruthless

merchant competitors—are everywhere, and conduct yourself accordingly. You may just survive to have a nice stay. Keep this guide handy, and you can at least guard against being lost and duped by false information.

## The Quarters

Know, O traveler, that the City of Coin has nine districts proper, and twelve districts in all (the three extra regions represent the burial district and the regions outlying the city walls to the north and south).

In this guide, we follow the path of a traveler approaching the city from the north, and tending first to the coast. As in many cities, Athkatlan districts are locally called "quarters" even though there are more than four of them.

**Wave District:** This quarter is home to businesses concerned with seafaring trade, shipbuilding, ropemaking, and mapmaking. Scribes and sages tend to dwell here or in adjoining Temple District (Once a formal scholars' quarter was between Moonhall and the Dome of the Rose). Moonhall, the conical temple to Selûne, is the most readily recognized Wave landmark. Sleep here is often hampered by the tolling of the Great Griffon, a seven-ton bell used to





sound warnings to shipmasters trying to run through storms into the harbor.

**Temple District:** Religious sites, inns, and taverns that cater to pilgrims, business offices, and the residences of well-to-do merchants dominate this quarter. In olden days the quarter was the center of Athkatla wizardry. I did manage to tour and report on major features here.

**Gem District:** This is the most spectacularly wealthy quarter of Athkatla, home to “new money” in all its vulgar (and breathtaking) excess. This area fascinated me. I investigated it first and most thoroughly, report on it in these pages, and (I fear) came to the attention of my enemies by my activities here.

**Trades District:** Most of the busy, independent merchants of the city call this district home. Dunstul's Pump, a drinking-water source free to all, is a popular local meeting place. The Black Frog is the current local tavern of choice.

**River District:** Derelicts, the destitute elderly, and the poorest Athkatlans dwell on the mean and stinking streets of this least respectable city quarter. Sailors are recruited and take shore leave here (drinking, brawling, and wenching seem their most popular pursuits). Those who don't go to sea toil daily on the harbor barges, taking garbage away and goods to and from vessels that can't—or who

owners don't want to—get to a wharf to tie up.

**The Bridge:** This span across the Alandor is the sole land link between Athkatla's two halves within the city walls, though there are persistent rumors of deep tunnels beneath the city, which I've never been able to find a way into. Anyone who uses a weapon on the bridge or tries to block anyone's way is put to death instantly.

**Bridge District:** Home to many poor laborers (street vendors, shop helpers, cart-and-carry men, hod-carriers), the narrow, winding streets of this quarter hold businesses catering to the caravan trade. You can find many shady little shops selling illicit, broken, and many-times-used goods. Bordryn's Bucket is the local tavern of choice.

**Guards District:** This quarter is the home of mercenaries, adventurers, guards, and attendant businesses. Adventurers aren't much welcome elsewhere in the city, unless they spend lavishly; Amnians don't regard adventuring as a legitimate trade. Visitors often head here for the Five Flagons tavern or the Den of the Seven Vales inn and festhall; both are new, clean, and currently popular.

**Center District:** Coins flow, merchants deal, and power is hurled without pause in this always-bustling mercantile heart of Athkatla. The open shopping



stadium of Waukeen's Promenade is the greatest landmark here, though the quarter also holds many taverns, inns, and festhalls of the wealthy.

**Scepter District:** Formerly the site of a minor palace for royalty visiting from Esmeltaran, this most exclusive of city districts is home to the Council House and aristocratic families. The most powerful families (such as the Chainstones and Hardsharns) own entire city blocks here—sprawling compounds rather than mere mansions. No commoners are welcome here unless they are on specific errands for “Scepternians.” The smoothly tapering needle rising up here is the magically warded Cloakspell Tower. It is an abandoned mage's tower and the most striking Scepter landmark.

**Grave District:** Even the cascading coins of Athkatla can't keep its citizens from ending up here. The quarter is filled with ornate mortuary houses, much used for trysts, business meetings, and even daily dining. Grave district is heavily patrolled at night to prevent ongoing tent-dwelling, business use of the tombs, and overbold lawlessness.

## The Gates

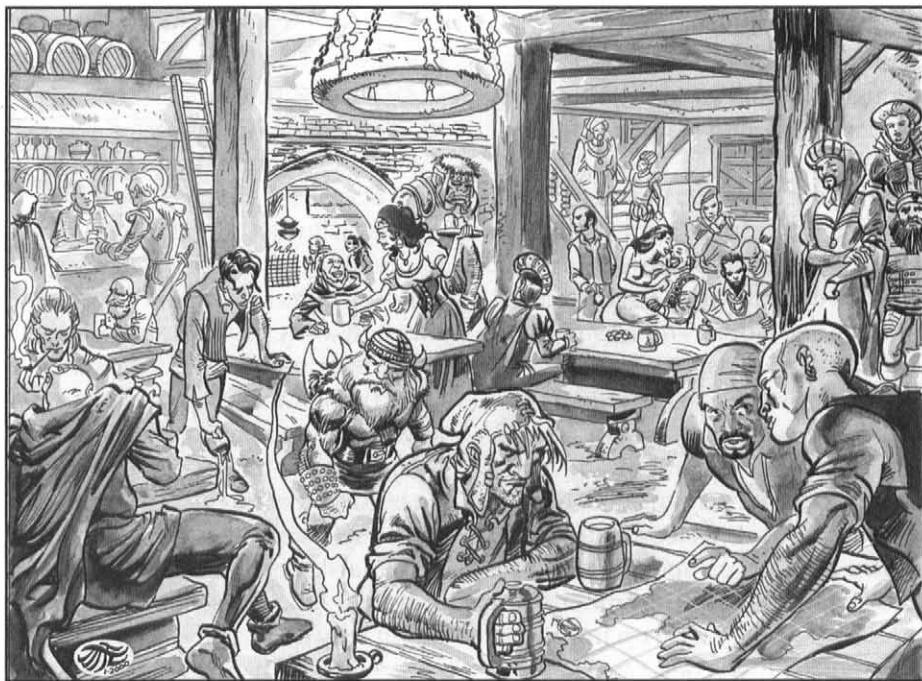
Athkatla has six outer gates. Naming these around from the north, they are: Alandamer's, Meirtyn, Heroes', Sparandar, Julkoon, and Oloemander. A seventh gate, Cold Dolor,

links Grave District with the rest of the city.

Of course, those gates are supplemented by the Sea-Gates across the harbor mouth and the Chain-Gate across the river.

The visitor to Athkatla should be aware that noncitizens must pay a pass-toll of “any one coin” to pass through a city gate. There's no such toll at Sparandar, but there is at Cold Dolor. Most pay a fandar, but if anyone tries to pass something not recognized as a coin by the guard, he is barred from passage until he yields up a gold or silver coin. Certain guards use this feeble authority to harass folk whose look, realm, or blood they don't like.

Streets in Athkatla are well lighted at all times. Large, spindle-shaped oil lamps (called “storm-lanterns” because their shuttering keeps the flame alight even in gale-force winds) serve this purpose. Frequent patrols of city-paid “lighters” use long, double-hooked metal poles to bring these halfling-height lamps down from the shopfront hooks where they hang. Patrols refill lamps without extinguishing them (unless the wick itself needs replacing), then rehang them with brisk efficiency. Lighter patrols go armed, have lanterns of their own, and are at least six strong, with two fillers, two “vatsmen” (with kegs of oil on their backs), and two who stand guard, facing outward, during a filling.



# The Copper Coronet

## Tavern



Smugglers, pirates, and shady folk for hire are the clientele of this dirty dive. Tourists, sailor-recruiters, lady escorts, and most Athkatlans seldom set foot on the sagging floor of this dingy, reeking place. It's generally thought that they wouldn't be safe without a large and well-armed bodyguard.

The jovial but wary tavernmaster, Sarvo Droostan, is a fat cask of a man. His watered-down beer and cheap wines are bought by the cask whenever "Old Sarvo" can find prices low enough.

Sarvo oversees four mountainous bartenders, balding and overmuscled louts nearly seven feet tall. They double as bouncers. Bordovan, Delric, Othlo, and Vaermaer wear breastplates, greaves, and pelvic



armor at all times, topped off with earrings and sinister stares. All four of these alert, battle-skilled men are expert at spotting feigned slumber, fake drunkenness, thievery, spell-casting, and the drawing of weapons. Behind the bar, they keep many tankards and fist-sized stones, which they can throw hard and accurately to any location in the sprawling, many-pillared taproom. They don't hesitate to augment such attacks with crossbows bolts and hurled stools or patrons if the need arises. The bartenders adopt a surly manner and avoid becoming overfriendly with patrons. Their manner turns positively glacial if a guard, city official, or obviously wealthy person enters the bar, or if anyone becomes too friendly with one of the Coronet's two barmaids.

The barmaids, Jalith and Maerae, are young, buxom lasses whose only pay is food and drink; if they want to see any coin, they're allowed to use their sleeping time (dawn to highsun) to run errands or do tasks for any customer who wants to hire them. Both are surprisingly cheerful, love a good time, and don't mind dirt or squalor. They're also utterly fearless and know Athkatla surprisingly well. If given clothes to complete the disguise, they can successfully act haughty and wealthy. Jalith and Maerae never trick or swindle

customers, knowing that such treachery will probably be fatal.

The Coronet building includes a kitchen, with pantry beneath, located behind a long bar that dominates the taproom. A large and foul-smelling common seawater-slucice privy opens out of the right-hand taproom wall, and the tavern is open from just after highsun until dawn, every day.

The kitchen is the domain of Old Skratha, a warty, wrinkled, and bad-tempered woman who, it's rumored, has a lot of troll blood in her parentage. She serves the sole reason for the Coronet's steady clientele: "sarks," which are meals made by scooping out the hearts of moldy and stale rounds of bread and loading stew into the cavity. The stew consists of harbor water and leavings, usually fish guts, catfish, mussels, dead dogs and rats, dew-worms and herbs Skratha gathers from the Grave District at dawn. It's the only meal many of the patrons of the Coronet get, or can afford.

Skratha is deadly with the hooked knife she carries; the rumor is that the men she slays go into her stews. She's known to add snake venom to her sarks if she's paid: rare and tasteless drops of two sorts of poison that either induce slumber or slow victims. Both also numb pain and neutralize other poisons.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Elminster: But other poisons are neutralized for only 1 turn.





# Temple District



Most northerly of the districts of Athkatla, the Temple District is also one of the most staid and orderly, a place where the tall, narrow, look-alike manors of the well-to-do are interspersed with offices of trading concerns that rarely look different from the houses that surround them. Its name is a holdover from earlier days, when streets crowded with many small temples could be found here. Now, only such names as the Street of Seven Altars and

Godsmoot survive; the visitor will search this orderly grandeur in vain for holy places, or even much of interest to the eye. Here is the prosperity of closed gates, watchful guards, and high walls.

This quarter is also the territory of gossip and harsh measurings of social standing, where residents take careful note of who visits whom, how many new horses and rare flowers from afar appear, and similar trivial assessments of social standing. Locals notice the tiniest changes, where the visitor simply



stands bewildered or indifferent.

Of course, there are sights to interest even the indifferent eye here, if one knows where to look. And if there's one thing Volo has mastered (aside from running prudently), it's looking.

The traveler will see only a few shops here, a lone tavern, and no inns. The hauteur of the coin-besotted forces "lowly" establishments into other city districts—thus giving the idiots (sorry, fine citizens) who dwell here longer and longer walks to get to anything they can buy, eat, or drink. This, of course, means they call out their coaches to rumble three blocks into less fortunate districts, and crowd the streets with idle conveyances and bored drovers. Meanwhile they stroll around so they can be seen spending.

## Temples No More

Once Athkatla was a center for magical power in Amn. That lasted until about a century ago, when the madness in the form of rampaging tanar'ri spread over the countryside from the School of Wonder. Young King Dhanar of the Parhek Dynasty proclaimed a moratorium against wizardry, declaring it seditious, and ordered that all known wizards be taken into custody.

This made the Temple District—home to many mages and the site of grand abbeys to Mystra, Azuth, and a mages' school—a flashpoint.

Literally, that is. These grand buildings and their inhabitants were put to the torch, though the dry summer of 1267 DR also saw many other buildings in northern Athkatla go up in flames, rekindling old trade wars among the wealthy families of Amn.

Much of the city fell into chaos; many other holy houses in Temple District fell as families struck at their rivals through the churches they sponsored or to which they belonged. One of the last major acts of Amnian royalty before King Dhanar's assassination in 1276 was to brutally quell the uprisings and unrest among the merchant families and exile many of them from the city. This royal action against three very powerful noble families led directly to Dhanar's assassination and attempts by said nobility to claim the throne for themselves.

Thus, the name of Temple District is maintained as a reminder that the gods are more important than mortal fears or mortal wars, and they remain long after all of us die out.

The alert eye in the streets of Temple District today can readily see remnants of temples. Many columns are simply too grand for any home, and statues among the grand mansions often have religious nature. (To spot them, simply look up at the architecture, not ahead at the outrageous feathered tiara and cutaway glister-gemmed



gown of the oh-so-noble lady sneering down at you from her coach as she instructs her driver to run you down.)

The traveler should of course be aware that both private and city guards both take a dim view of strangers tarrying overlong and looking overmuch at a particular home. When accosted, I always tell them that I saw a bird pluck a gem right off a beautiful lady's hat, and I'm trying to find its roost for her. Perhaps that tale will work for you, too.

Other than the best collection of ornate (and firmly locked) gates anywhere in Faerûn, Temple District has few sights to delight the traveler's eye, and even fewer destinations to visit—but here are three of local importance.

## Theater

### The Crown Aflame



Once part of a tall, pillared temple to Azuth, this grand-looking building on Sarlannus Street is now a lushly appointed theater, known to some irreverent actors as "the Red Fruit" because its interior is drenched in red velvet and its plush walls bulging out in a profusion of small, round balconies. A seat here costs 4 gold coins by day and 8 in the evening (wines and servers to pour refills are both extra).

Performances rarely last more than two hours, and one is

expected to leave in the intervals between them; a "grand play" and a "farce frolic" typically alternate from highsun to false dawn. Audiences are rarely large except for debut performances or when news has spread that the actors will try something very dramatic (such as an attempted seduction, onstage branding, or cutting the clothes of an unsuspecting member of the audience to ribbons).

Steeply raked seats descend to a magnificent oval stage. The crew here is known for their garishly painted sets—and the actors for their magnificent voices and broad, anything-for-a-laugh overacting (which makes some tragic scenes a bumpy gallop of alternating tears and mirth). Voices carry well, and song is often a part of performances, but actors who take things too seriously are apt to be mocked. Playwrights who do the mocking will have their plays twisted and derided by most actors.

Recently-famous "grand plays" include *The Gilded Unicorn* by Raulivan Torthtra (a rising young playwright of Zazesspur who possesses good looks and an eye for ladies, as well as a great ear for capturing how folk truly speak), Zarghar's classic *And So They Met The Gargoyle*, and *The Shattered Throne Tumbles* by the blind Ilmatari monk Annadas Athlo.

Farces are performed constantly, with the jests and caricatures



changing to stay current as the decades pass, but rarely achieve fame. A local exception is *The Terrible Tale of Talvadar the Merchant*. The fool Talvadar wanders down a street of swindlers and cuckolds, unintentionally betraying their secrets and setting them to murderous pursuit—wherein they constantly stab or club each other, while the idiot-hero wanders along, oblivious and unscathed.

The *Terrible Tale of Talvadar the Merchant* is of such enduring popularity that recently a group of Athkatlan youths have declared themselves "Talvadarists." They dress in the same crimson robes worn in the play and imitate their fictional hero whenever possible. The more philosophical among them contend that the only way to be truly happy is to ignore the unpleasant and dangerous things in life. The less philosophical simply like to bring traffic to halt when they cross a busy street.

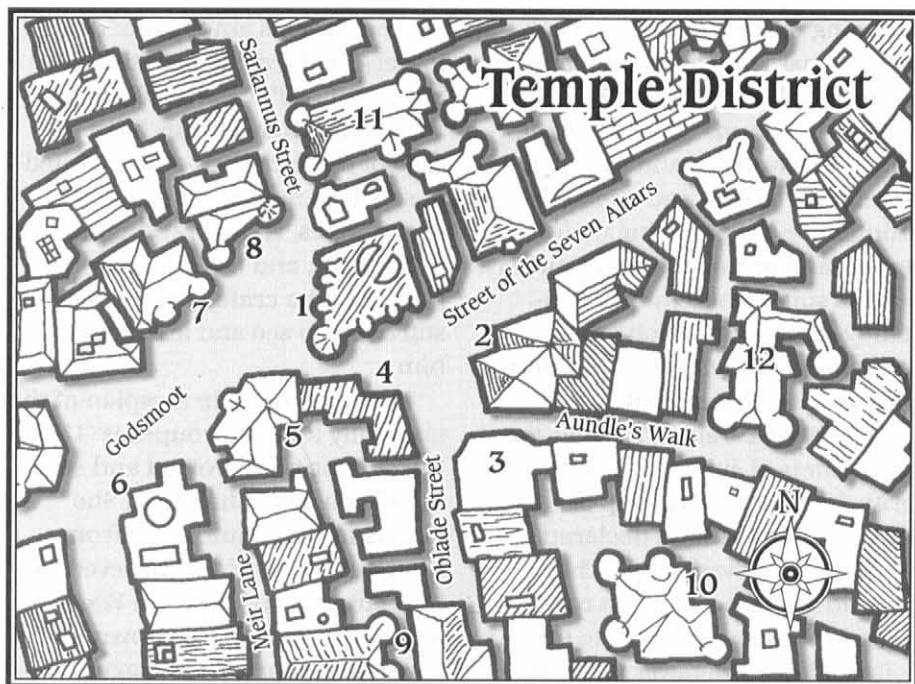
Like most Amnian theaters, the Crown has a staff of a dozen or so regulars who can play kings, warriors, harlots, tumbling boys, and beggars. They bolster their ranks with various traveling troupes who typically stay for two tendays or a month before moving on to other cities. It's the custom among true aficionados of the theater to attend familiar plays at least once on each run mounted in Athkatla by a troupe.

Most famous among the "Crown Players" is the aging but still magnificent "Lord" Mhaviklo Nathalar. In his day, Mhaviklo has been the rage of the ladies, an orator invited to speak by nobles, a master of several troupes, an actors' guildmaster in a far city, and now a semiretired master of the craft. Aspiring actors still come to see and learn from him.

The most notable thespian of the currently touring troupes is "Lady Harpy," the shrill-voiced and striking Shadazzryl Chalraeva. She claims to be a commoner from Tharsult but is widely believed to be a runaway noble from Waterdeep or Tethyr. She's known for repeatedly plunging a dagger into her bared breast during a death scene (relying on a *slowcreep heal* spell to keep her alive until the curtain).

Her most famous performance was a portrayal of the goddess Sune that so convinced a Sunite priest that he was witnessing a manifestation of the goddess that he called on her to give Faerûn words of guidance. Ironically, the goddess did manifest, her glowing face (thrice the height of a man) floating over the stage. Sune imparted to Shadazzryl the ability to walk on air a foot or more above the stage for the rest of the evening but took from her the ability to speak. Shadazzryl was forced to sing her lines to finish the performance.





### MapKey

1. The Crown Aflame (theater)
2. The Harfin Draether (tavern)
3. The Pride of Athkatla (shop)
4. Seven Songs Importing (exotic goods ordering)
5. House of Marimma Theer, actor/impresario (plays presented privately, by commission)
6. Silkstone Fashions (tailor and fashion accessories shop)
7. Brundith Fine Furnishings (furniture; replicas and hiding places their specialties)
8. House of Thammas Thoul, collector and merchant (fabulously rich; deals in spices, fine metal work, and formerly slaves; collections include blown glass art, lady servants from exotic locales, and paintings)
9. House of Isker Lhavanas, dealer in weaponry and horse armor (former temple of Azuth, rumored to retain many magical defenses)
10. House of Klarynda Ballasdreia, "The Lady of Masks," dealer in perfumes and beauty masks (a renowned predator of men, schemer, and shrewd investor; her house is a former shrine to Tymora)
11. The Society of the Lost Ingot (private club for male Athkatlan-born traders who've attained fabulous wealth but lost at least one trading-vessel at sea; social meeting-place and investment collective, housed in a former temple to Ilmater)
12. The Temple Bell (shop selling vestments, holy symbols, sacred writings, and religious accessories for many faiths; housed in a former nobles' mansion of the possibly extinct Flamaerdown family)



Many patrons of the theater have other favorites among the traveling players. Notable are the acrobatic, moon-faced rogue Meerdaun Jhavalanko; the "Stone King" Halvaruth Feirn, so-called because his face always remains impassive, but subtle intonations of his voice hint at great depths of complex feeling; and the former tavern dancer and courtesan Tarathae Deluskar, famous for sensuous dances and scenes of seduction that often captivate her audiences.

Even when no performance is being mounted, there's something to see at the Crown. In return for three gold coins, and under the watchful eye of two warriors who guard against vandalism and wandering off, visitors can see one of Athkatla's most remarkable sights.

That sight is the Talking Painting, a long, many-paneled scene of long-dead guildmasters and burghers of Athkatla, each life-sized and enspelled so as to utter phrases aloud. Some say the phrases are part of an elaborate joke or hoax, and some say they hint at the location of hidden treasure. Still others insist they hold magic words of activation for now-forgotten items and artifacts, or perhaps they are the pass-phrases of a now-dead (or hidden) cult. Some of the phrases include:

- "No more to the right, but as the blade shines!"

- "Behold the wave! In its foam, drawing back, is shaped the dream for us all."
- "Three stones stand to mark the glory, and the greatest of these is Jandra's Thumb."
- "Where sword blades are round, there look for the Raven's Eye. Follow where it gazes."
- "Four obeyed Odeller, and they have come to regret their folly."
- "The key is the right flame in the right eye of the right skull."
- "No more stinging insects and slithering vipers; the pyre is nigh."
- "Hold not with false-speaking turnkeys, but heed he of one eye red, the other blue."
- "Take wing to the west, and look behind the Windspire, in the dragon's grave."
- "They lie beneath where the skull screams: one of gold coins, and one all of gems."
- "A flagon of dragon, a tankard of fire! He who raises such is the one to follow."
- "Beware the fourth step, and touch not the wall of scales!"
- "In the heel of Lockawe's boot are two keys: handle like fish, handle like blade."

Perhaps you'll be lucky enough to be one of the rare visitors to hear a new phrase. Speeches seem to be added, or heard for the first time, about once every six or seven years.



## **Tavern**

### **The Harfin Draether**



Noted for hearty meals rather than its watery beer and meager selection of wines, this establishment is named for its long-dead founder. It entirely fills two mansions that resemble neighboring residences, and patrons take their favorite tables or wander from room to room until they find a vacant table. They can also pay double fare for a reserved room.

Portions consist of large, roast game birds in a variety of rich sauces delight the palate, and boiled greens are enlivened with mustards and bowls of hot-pickled limes. Avoid the parsnips and cabbages, which come tasteless, boiled hard and whole. They rest in the stomach like vengeful stones.

Because this district has little to offer hungry residents who cannot dine at home, the Harfin is always crammed. Would-be diners stalk between tables seeking a place to sit from when the Harfin opens (sometime midmorning, depending on when the duty cook thinks the overnight roasts and soups are ready) until it closes (not long after nightfall) and drinkers are escorted out. Those desiring to linger to conduct a little more business can do so for payment of a danter or two, but an extra hour at most can be gained before the Harfin is

cleared in earnest. This is a favorite time for well-to-do Athkatlans to plan mischief.

Think of a house full of people talking business nonstop as they eat, strike gongs for service, and call out to those they see passing whom they want to do business with next. It's not a place for lovers to gaze tenderly.

Nor is it a place to savor the fare. At the Harfin, it comes hot, swiftly, and the drive is to serve it forth, not delight the tongue. Ah, but at least they know how to do fowl! Melon pie is often rotting and fly-ridden, but a popular order, as it comes with a plate of sugar-cookies that deservedly find universal approval.

The cellar disappoints, but from its thin ranks choose the Saravva, a tart green wine made near Esmeltaran. The pale yellow, slightly bitter Uldar, from Eshpurta, is reliably stolid, and goes well with nuts or cheese, though amid better offerings it would be dismissed as no better than mouth-rinse.

## **Shop**

### **The Pride of Athkatla**



No, despite the name, this is not a ship, actress, or lady of esteemed beauty. It's an enclosed market, an echoing, poorly lighted collection of curtained-off boutiques in the shell of a great stone pile that was once the forehall of the main temple to



Savras. Here various traveling traders and costers hire local vendors, who possess splendid clothes, familiar faces, and a knowledge of local politics and intrigues, to sell their wares. The vendors front counter after counter where one can buy everything from the sharp-flavored cheeses of the Tashalar to ornate replacement locks for coffers forced open by thieves. (Or even splendid new keys to replace lost keys, thus opening coffers for their rightful owners, if you catch my meaning.)

The most outrageous of the vendors is Sulrajack, a raven-bearded, sharp-featured whirlwind whose golden tongue seldom ceases. He seems to know everyone in Athkatla, and his looks seem to hold ladies in thrall. He claims to hail from "a far mountain, where gods often walked," and to have awakened there as a toddling youth among a great heap of gold coins. The heap was crowned with the skeleton of a long-dead dragon whose hoard it all must have been, he says—a hoard he will someday find again and claim as his own!

Sulrajack tells this tale often, and other tales, too. It's known that folk of both genders come to him for murmured advice on love, and

potions and lotions concerned with such dalliance—and I myself have seen merchants come evening after evening to toss him a coin for "a new jest to take home" . . . which he promptly provides.

The alert visitor may notice that Sulrajack studies the faces of everyone who comes into the Pride of Athkatla. He also makes subtle hand signs from time to time to any one of a dozen or more armed men who stroll in and out constantly.

This is hardly surprising. Let me be the one to break the news to all Faerûn that the old temple cellars, reached by means of a secret door in the pillar behind Sulrajack's counter, are used as a meeting place by the Athkatlan cell of the Cowled Wizards, under Khollynnus Paac!

In those curtained depths they still worship Mystra, Azuth, Savras, and other deities of magic, in rituals that always include the castings of powerful spells to protect and further the work and prosperity of cell members.

Say nothing of such things, should you meet Sulrajack while shopping, for an all-too-apt Athkatlan saying applies here: "A wizard's hand holds ready death."



# Gem District



f money and excess are everything in Amn, and Athkatla contains the most ostentatious outpour-

ing of money on splendors for effect, then Gem District is the most glittering area of the City of Coin.

These are the finest addresses in all of Amn, where "new money" is constantly buying, razing or "improving" the excesses of others—and demonstrating that the ability to amass and hurl money buys no shred of good taste (whatever that is). The eye falls on no particular landmarks in Gem District, because *everything* would be a landmark (so large, glittering, and ostentatious is it all), were it not so crammed together with everything else similarly overblown.

Coaches, palanquins, and ornately bedecked mounts are the rule in the streets here. The larger the mount, the better; over the last few seasons, elephants are becoming common. Aside from scurrying errand runners and other valued servants, few folk of any importance go on foot.

A network of private guards, serving the wealthiest of the wealthy, adhere to strict rules set forth by the Council in order to prevent pitched battles in the streets.

Patrols are rarely less than a dozen strong, and they gleam with impressive armor and weaponry, notably long polearms tipped with *wands of paralyzation*. They work together uneasily to keep peace in the streets. Thus, despite the proximity of Gem District to the impoverished River District, street crime is almost unknown. Tips (coins of any denomination; it's the gesture that counts) tossed to these patrols ensure that a visitor will receive a minimum of questioning and harassment. No arrival or departure goes unnoticed, and no horse or elephant droppings remain for more than moments before being scooped up for sale elsewhere, as fertilizer.

By night, glowspells—drifting clouds of radiance rather than enspelled globes or oil lanterns used elsewhere—light the streets in a pleasant mingling. By edict, loud or persistent noises must be magically abated or their sources taken elsewhere, so the wildest rev-els are indoors or celebrated in other districts.

Local legend insists that even the sewers of Gem District are patrolled by "the Ghost Patrol." Hard facts are difficult to come by; Athkatlans seem determined to amuse themselves at the expense of any visitor





who asks with an ever-wilder array of "I-can-top-that" tales about the Ghost Patrol. But the Patrol is apparently a disciplined group of watchghosts and wraiths that diligently skulk about the underways, slaying or driving out undesirables in return for unspecified rewards. They often moan as they approach, it is said. (Fancy-tale or not, I did hear an eerie droning on my one attempt to duck down a sewer-flume to avoid a guard patrol's questions.)

Gem District has no places where one can rent accommodation (even long-term), few places where one can dine or drink (except as a guest at a revel), and no grocery or general wares shops. Merchants make deliveries here for even trivial purchases (or the citizens send servants to shop in other city districts).

Visitors without business here are tolerated at best; gawkers and loiterers will be politely but firmly encouraged to move along. Beings openly armed or committing acts of violence can expect to be attacked on sight unless known to be Gem District inhabitants by the guard patrols.

Those who deeply desire to tour the glories of the Gem District are advised to get themselves invited to a succession of revels. Failing that, adopt all the trappings of wealth (palanquins, bodyguards, gaudy garb, and servants can all be hired elsewhere in Athkatla). Then pose

as someone from out of town looking to buy "something small and modest—to sleep six hundred, say." Or become a delivery runner for a day or two, and do all one's looking at a full run while being coldly scrutinized by innumerable private guards.

With all of this said, there are at least seven features to be found in Gem District that no visitor should be unaware of; descriptions of these follow.

### **Baerlbohun House**

Visitors to Gem District are warned not to confuse this gaudy and tasteless mansion with Baerlbohun Towers. Owned by cousins who utterly ignore each other (at revels, each one strives to ignore the other first, and hardest), they are themselves architectural rivals. One should not mistake an invitation to one for an invite to the other.

A onetime jeweler and toymaker whose first house and shop could fit inside one of his walk-in wardrobes, Unsible Baerlbohun is the classic "Athkatlan risen to riches." He profited greatly from a clandestine trading relationship with merchants of Gond, who sold him smokepowder and explosive-trapped locks fashioned to behead or at least blind those seeking to force them. Unsible, in turn, sold them at an outrageous markup to the citizens of Amn. Many inhabitants of Gem District insist on



calling Unsible Baerlbohun the "Mad Toymaker," though his interests long ago outstripped personally making things. He'd prefer the world to forget that he was ever anything so lowly as a toymaker.

This overblown, gaudy palace of sparkling glass, gilded statuary of surpassing ugliness, and magically glowing fountains is the endless flower of Unsible's swift prosperity. Few addresses in this most haughty of Athkatlan districts are grander, few homes sprawl over more space, and few buildings anywhere are more enthusiastic eyesores.

An Athkatlan describes the forceful emptying of one's stomach after too much wine or bad food, as "straking," and it's no accident that the seat of the Baerlbohuns is known as "the Strakery." Unsible's family consists of two fat, frightened, furtive wives of Unsible's; one wild and winking daughter, Arisrathra, known to half the city's men as the ideal "ready and willing for all foolery" revel-companion. There are also three lazy, waddling mountains of sons, whose names I thankfully forget after that of the eldest: Purdynkul.

Pink stone turrets bristle in mismatched profusion from towers too spindly to gracefully support them—one wonders when the whole edifice will come crashing down. Grand arches that lead nowhere in particular are everywhere, and fat statues depicted in

acts of questionable taste adorn ledges and niches on every wall and roof. The downspouts, for example, are troll-headed cherubs relieving themselves. Teams of stonecarvers and masons are always at work adding Unsible's latest whim to the already overbuilt structure.

Several neighbors have steadfastly refused ever more generous offers to sell their own mansions and allow Baerlbohun "enthusiasms" (some prefer the term "madness") to creep over yet more of the City of Coin. But the Mad Toymaker seems determined to oust those who would resist him. He's had keeps built that tower over his neighbor's homes and overhang them, expanding with projecting buttresses from which his workers have managed to drop an astonishing number of stone blocks, full chamberpots, and other missiles.

At least one neighbor responded to such harassment by hiring a band of professional slayers to reap a bloody harvest of workmen. This led to a night-long private war that raged in the House until hastily hired Baerlbohun mercenaries hunted down the last of the slayers. On the following day, more than a thousand heavily armed troops assembled by the Mad Toymaker's coins marched around and around the home of the offending neighbor. The show of force effectively ended the struggle—though midnight catapult bombardments of



mysterious origin still occur from time to time.

Another neighbor responded by purchasing two flying daggers (knives enchanted to fly and strike like wasps) and letting them loose from his own roof, to imperil workers above in an unfinished Baerlbohun floor. That only led to the hiring of a mage, who cast some nasty retaliatory magics that stopped just short of violating the severe laws placed against acts of arson and vandalism in the City of Coin. To this day, Baerlbohun House is believed to have on staff a guardian mage who animates various automatons and traps against thieves, business foes of the Mad Toymaker, and the aesthetically outraged.

Local legend insists that the feverish construction at Baerlbohun House is driven by Unsible's insane need to hide gems and coins within extensive layers of ornamentation, confusing and unnecessary rooms and galleries, and an ever-changing building layout. The riches were allegedly stolen from various business partners, who perished mysteriously over the years. Unsible, 'tis said, constantly makes and hides new maps to his walled-up wealth, as construction continues, unfettered by such inhibitions as taste. The Mad Toymaker, it's said, attacks anyone unfortunate enough to even glimpse one of these drawings.

### **Baerlbohun Towers**

This Gem District landmark is the epitome of crass, gaudy Athkatlan tastelessness. From its top-heavy turrets to its many-pillared doors, every surface in the Towers is covered with clashing hues, warring styles, and needless encrustations of gilded and carved ornament. Archways that lead nowhere rise around walled, mosaic-tiled courtyards; gardens are noticeably absent from this great house. An army of masons, stonecutters and sculptors are constantly at work adding every feature that catches the eye of the master of the Towers: the fat, bowlegged "Toadroarer" (as his hoarse, oily voice has led Athkatlans to dub him) Phonchandas Baerlbohun.

A typical self-made Amnian merchant, Baerlbohun has done well with large stonecutting contracts (he owns most of the quarries near Athkatla), moneylending, and fishing fleets. His moneylending activities are suspiciously close to pirate concerns, yet his fishing concerns are remarkably free of them.

Toadroarer's boundless ambitions drag him ever upward, clawing and fawning his way up the social ladder to heights where he's apparently too stupid to discern his present danger. However, certain elements in the Council have seen fit to use rather than discard him. They attend many of his parties in magical disguises to gauge public



mood by asking 'innocent' questions of half-drunken fellow guests and by spreading rumors and disinformation.

Phonchandas Baerlbohun seems to be on the verge of realizing that his relentless climb upward has become a futile climb onward and sideways, and has plunged into hosting revelry with sudden fervor. Or perhaps he's begun to feel the need for a fresh bride and knows no other way of procuring one.

Over a marital career that has spanned three wives thus far, Baerlbohun has produced one plain, whining daughter, Shalmatrita; a youngest son, Jaeraevyn, who's a sly thief and a lover of conspiracies; and Baerindar, Cloedraen, Durthchas, and Olltolivar, burly, drunken sons who delight in dueling, wenching, and smashing things. The three wives are dead: one in childbirth, one to drink, and one to a fall or suicidal leap from a Towers battlement. The Baerlbohun clan is not looked upon with favor in Athkatlan circles, and many merchants grit their teeth whenever they enter into dealings with Phonchandas. They are all too aware that the continued beating of Toadroarer's overworked heart is all that stands between their coins and his wastrel offspring.

A bully fond of cruel sport (animals torn apart in contests, and servants chased and humiliated), Phonchandas is also given to fits of

shouting and red-faced rage. He can also be captivated in a moment by new ideas, new schemes, and new architectural features or conceits. He recklessly funds his whims, often being swindled but from time to time taking in huge profits when something works out, such as the Noldonar process for melting and reusing broken glass into fresh bottles.

When enraged, Baerlbohun will attack anyone and anything; he has murdered scores of people. Sneering adventurers and seasoned warriors are warned that he seems to bear—among the staggering weight of jewelry he wears at all times—*ironguard* and spell-warding protections. He has prevailed against formidable wizards and accomplished captains of war alike.

The Towers were built primarily to impress, but Phonchandas seems to have grasped the fact that to have guests to impress, it must either be an inn (such a common undertaking is of course out of the question), or be suited to host parties. Accordingly, behind the huge pink stone turrets sprawls a huge palace that houses no less than four separate full-sized feast halls, each furnished with raised stages, minstrels' galleries, and two tiers of balconies.

Phonchandas did not begin the Towers from empty ground, or by demolishing what had stood there before. In his impatience, he seized



### MapKey

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Fallenstar Fine Gems (jewelry shop)</li><li>2. Blevynsoar House (jewelry &amp; map shop)</li><li>3. Redcloak Trading (land &amp; building sales)</li><li>4. Sarango's (jewelry shop)</li><li>5. House of Darastiir Thalongal, merchant shipping fleet owner (and reputed smuggler-for-hire of</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>armies, slaves, treasures, and weapons)</li><li>6. Baerlbohun Towers (mansion)</li><li>7. House of "Lady Stargowns," Malareetha Narindryn, socialite (schemer and wealthy investor in hundreds of Athkatlan businesses and properties)</li><li>8. Baerlbohun House (mansion)</li><li>9. Starnir's Pool of Jewels (jewelry shop)</li></ol> |
|--|---|

upon the largest, grandest mansion available, and set about improving it. The rooms that awed him, thankfully, have been left largely as they were: lofty halls and chambers of white, glossy marble, furnished with gilt-framed mirrors as tall as four men.

Of course, Baerlbohun couldn't resist adding voluptuous larger-than-life unclad human statuary and garishly large floral flourishes for wall-sconces. All of it is in gold, naturally. These grand older parts of the Towers also feature many huge portraits, most of them as tall



as four men. The frames hold dark, dusty scenes of disapproving human faces staring down from scenes of unknown castles and unfamiliar forests.

Some say Baerlbohun doesn't even know who the folk portrayed are; many Athkatlans say he bought them all from a giant's mansion being demolished somewhere in the Tashalar. Persistent local legend insists that certain of these portraits are prisons for the wizards who stare endlessly out of them. I can attest that many of the pictures impart an uncomfortable, acute, and unending sensation of being watched. The tales add that many of these mages work magic out of spite, insanity, or the desperate desire to affect the wider world around them. In rare cases they may hurl spells out of their prisons, but usually they subtly place *suggestions* and spells in the heads of creatures who pass by, empowering even nonmages and the unwitting to hurl forth spells in time to come when set conditions are met.

Of course, there's the inevitable tale that one painting is a magical portal that whisks those who step into it elsewhere in Faerun, an idea that certain former servants heatedly insist is true—though they seem utterly unable to agree on just which canvas has this power.

Another story came into existence to discourage drunken or

falsely drunken guests from damaging portraits by striding into them when revels grow late and wild. One painting, somewhere in the Towers, thrusts forth a random array of ten-foot steel blades in violent unison when touched. The blades then promptly retreat back into the portrait, leaving the pierced body of the being who disturbed them to slide slowly and bloodily to the floor.

Phonchandas Baerlbohun dwells under the misapprehension that the world consists of those born hating him (foes sent to try him by the gods), his friends and admirers, and those who just haven't met him yet. Accordingly, visitors who desire to see the Towers or experience the sort of revel where too much is not enough are advised to simply place themselves in the Toadroarer's path, smile, and say they've heard great things about him.

An invitation will be immediate, and feasts occur about every three evenings, which is about how long it takes an army of servants to clean and reprovision the place from the last celebration. Be warned that deaths at such events are not uncommon, either from swiftly swung daggers or by venturing into areas under construction. Those imprudent enough to refer to Baerlbohun by his nickname in his hearing also court a swift demise.





### **Crimmordown Turrets**

"The Crim," as it's affectionately known by longtime Athkatlans of the correct (that is, lofty) social standing, is the longtime seat of the Crimmor merchant family. It frequently hosts the revels for which the Crimmors are famous—or infamous, among those who frown on spectacles and loose morals.

Its three stout and ancient castle keeps are joined by a bewildering tangle of newer, more stylish wings, halls, and covered skywalks. This rambling, confusing layout lends itself admirably to trysts, pranks, and private dalliances. Tiny walled gardens, secret spiral stairs, and curtained galleries are everywhere, all reached through a profusion of entrances. Each doorway has two servants: one to unlock the way, and a hidden second to spy and report on the safety of the first.

Invitations to Crimmor revels are eagerly sought, but the family frowns on those who sell them to others. The revels almost always feature troupes of actors portraying exciting personages: elven nobles purporting to be from Evermeet; a drow warband seeking slaves from among the guests; and "awakened from ages-long slumber" Netherese awed by the wealth and sophistication of the revel-guests. The revels always include music, acrobats, and "swiftknife" chefs, who concoct small "sizzlebites" right under the guests' noses. These savories are

sugared sweets of the palm-cluster sort.

Like several other old Athkatlan buildings, Crimmerdown is haunted. I myself have faced the apparition most folks see: a fat, balding man with a magnificent white moustache, who frantically runs down the mansion passages, three daggers in his back and the shoulders of his fine tunic ablaze. Ghostly hands gripping other daggers pursue him. The Crimmors claim not to know his identity, but from the tones in their tired voices, I doubt this.

Other visitors, over almost a century of sightings, have reported meeting with a chill wind that whispers softly that it will have them soon, "blood, bones, and all." Or a floating, purple skull that trails long tresses and glares unblinkingly at them with "red, burning, furious eyes" that are flat with hatred and tireless in their scrutiny. I've no idea if this haunting was born of the same causes as one that afflicts Hal-lownturrets House, or whether the similarities of the two phantoms is purely coincidental.

The Crimmors, or so local lore attests, also have their own ghostly monsters, the undead remnants of ancestors twisted into monstrous shapes by magical curses. The ghosts, who appear only to them, compel them to do certain tasks, from time to time during their lives. The only servant to have elaborated



on this, one Flaerdigus, spoke of a "a tall, cold, and sharp-spoken ghost with scales, a tail, and a serpent's head" one drunken evening more than a decade ago. He vanished soon thereafter.

Were it not for the small army of vigilant servants and the active hauntings, Crimmerdown is large enough to host large parties of intruders hidden away in various disused rooms and corners, uninvited and unheralded by Athkatlans at large or the Crimmors in particular. Most revels end with a dozen or so "lost" guests wandering through the dimly lighted labyrinth of rooms that is Crimmerdown, seeking ways out—or at least familiar surroundings.

The Red Guardroom in the South Tower, into which the ornate main entrance-arch of Crimmerdown leads, is lined with two dozen gleaming suits of armor. These are helmed horrors that most of the Crimmor family can command to instantly fight, carry, or form a moving shield for them.

### **Dancing Dolphins House**

Completed less than a dozen years ago, this is one of the most modern and ostentatious of the Gem District's "open mansions," those great houses often thrown open to guests.

Albaerlus Gudelmer is an ambitious man who seeks to increase his influence in Athkatlan mercantile circles by creating "shieldrings," or

collectives of many small merchants. Shieldrings work together to stand up to the large, established families such as the Argrims, Copriths, and Vymmars by pooling the finances of their members and speaking with one voice. Joining can be as simple as signing one's name and paying twelve danters—half that for Athkatlans, but as much as twenty roldons for a few of the more exclusive shieldrings.

Gudelmer has thus far been subtle and verbally adroit enough to avoid any direct confrontations with guilds, Amnian mercantile companies, major local merchant families, or the Council. But all of them have taken a hard look at him, moved to investigate his motives, and mounted standing watches over his doings.

Gudelmer has responded by throwing frequent parties for visiting and resident independent merchants, great and small, so that everyone can take their measure of him. He also uses the parties to spread his views of "a better, happier Amn for all" if merchants occasionally work together, avoiding conflict with "foreign interests" and "the established leaders of us all." Outlander merchants are always welcome at his feasts, so as to furnish his shieldrings with greater wealth and an ever-wider range of trading contacts.

Along the way, of course, Gudelmer never has to beg or



stretch for a loan. Some of the shieldrings he's established have found the need to pay top coin for properties he owned that suddenly seemed vital to shieldring interests. At the same time, his efforts have unquestionably allowed bulk buying of some goods for Athkatlan vendors and lower prices for all. The shieldrings have brought together unlikely mercantile allies, forged bonds that make many Amnians feel more kinship to their fellow citizens than ever before, and given hope to many small shopkeepers.

The Council has not failed to notice this last feature of the shieldrings. Criticism of the Council's overreaching power and its policies has sharply lessened in recent years. At the same time, it's clear they feel the need to keep watch over the ambitious Gudelmer, who continues to sell sails and imported glassware, but seems increasingly to be selling papers with deals written on them. I think it's safe to assume that the guests at any Gudelmer revel will include at least one—and probably more—Council informants.

The Shadow Thieves, at least as far as I can tell, seem content to leave the shieldrings and Gudelmer alone for now. They probably hope he'll build a stronger and more useful network of shieldrings if they're not in evidence—a network that can be of more use to them in the

future, when they need it to accomplish something big.

Gudelmer has avoided the one trap set for him by the Council thus far: He refused to involve his Pearl-bright shieldring in a kidnapping and slaving deal advanced by anonymous interests, even when "staggering profits" were promised and a substantial bribe offered. Since the death of his wife, the master of Dancing Dolphins House seems willing to undertake almost any risk and to care nothing for attempts to blackmail him or seduce him. Instead he takes cheerful advantage of, and even laughs at, those who try to bring him down.

The visitor can readily identify Dancing Dolphins House by its dramatically jutting dolphin downspouts, which provide surprised passersby on the street with roaring shafts of falling water during downpours. The house is also known for its gate of three sculpted stone dolphins, leaping up from the visitor's right in an arch to pass over the entrance doors and plunge down to the visitor's left.

Beyond the gate is a pleasant walled garden crammed with a strange mix of stone statuary from all over Faerûn. The House itself towers over these water-spouting blights in sleek and modern splendor.

The entry hall is as cavernous as that of many a temple. It leads to a long, wide passage lined with



gleaming suits of armor—helmed horrors, I'm told, that respond to the mental commands of Gudelmer or his steward, Rezifo, in guarding the house and family against theft or attack.

Prominent in the hall are the brightly painted shields of the ten shieldrings Gudelmer has established thus far: the red warhorn of Brightbar, the blue snail shell of Wavedeep, the crimson spear of Boldlance, the circle of eight gold coins of Allcircle, the identical crossed gold and green leaves of Fairseason, the sun and moon of Manymoons, the three cogs under sail of Windcoast, the perfect triangle of three sapphires of Glow-crown, the ring of five pearls of Pearlbright, and the crossed unicorn horns of Shiningbeast.

Beyond, the House opens up in a series of carefully contrived "pleasant views." One looks across an open gallery to a window festooned with flowers all of the same hue. Another peers through a succession of grand, statue-guarded doors along a line stretching through many rooms. All is for show, and everything shouts wealth, albeit with thankfully less of the crowded ornamentation that afflicts the abodes of so many Athkatlans.

Dancing Dolphins House boasts one long, high passage wherein stuffed dolphins hang in a long line from the ceiling. They can be made to swoop and swim on rods that

rise and fall as a chain is pulled to move them along. The lighting in this hall is a mottled, moving blue; it's almost beautiful enough to make up for the dreary bad taste of the stuffed procession overhead.

The House has the usual cluster of grand, dark-paneled stately rooms, a superior wine cellar, and deft servants. But guests do not get to see the House's most notorious feature: an extensive network of secret passages linking it to the cellars of many nearby homes. Gudelmer enthusiastically uses the passages to turn many a fair coin exchanging goods and currencies, and fencing goods of illicit origin or doubtful provenance. An unspoken side benefit of belonging to a shieldring is the ability to procure or get rid of particular goods swiftly and discreetly.

Local gossip suggests Gudelmer is less active in such shady pursuits in recent years, as his open dealings gain him ever more wealth. But it's also said that his four attractive daughters enjoy using the passages too—as their own careers blossom.

Raeveshara, Iylandra, and the twins Nilunele and Quaerthara (in descending order of age) have all become professional escorts and guides to the city for lonely visitors of means. Quick-witted and charming, their affectionate services are increasingly used by merchants desiring to conduct business in Athkatla swiftly, without days spent



trying to find guildmasters and particular local merchants while inn bills mount. The Gudelmer lasses, all of whom work independently, know just about everyone in Athkatla, how to find and meet with them, and how things are done locally.

The visitor will find a small round window, inset with a gilded bell, in the wall beside the descending dolphin at the gate of Dancing Dolphins House. Ringing this bell will cause the window to open. The servant who appears is shared by the four lasses; be warned that one may have to wait as long as three days if one desires a specific Gudelmer daughter. Raeveshara is the best actress, Iylandra is the most beautiful and an accomplished singer, and Nilunele is the most adventurous (willing, for example, to don disguises and participate in unlawful activities without hesitation or prolonged negotiations).

### **Hallowturrets House**

One of the oldest mansions in Gem District is the sprawling, many-lanterned mansion known affectionately as "Hollowturrets" to Athkatlans. This title refers not to any deficiency of the vast building or of its hospitality, but rather to the vast quantities of drinkables and edibles served to guests in the many revels held therein—and the fabled amount of storage space that must

lie in or beneath the estate just to hold such generous offerings.

Hallowturrets is the seat of the Hawkyns family, a long-established and extremely wealthy merchant clan. The Hawkyns fortune started in shipping but has now shifted to landowning and moneylending—and grown so splendid that none of the present family need work or worry about counting coins.

Instead, they enjoy life and seek out new clients (those in need of loans) by mounting an endless series of entertainments at Hallowturrets. More outlanders have seen the labyrinthine interior of this mansion than any other building in all of Athkatla. Many guests have wandered lost therein late at night when a revel has died down and only gentle music remains to guide them out.

Torgrym Hawkyns is a tall, kindly, balding man possessed of a magnificent white moustache and a roving eye. His wife and sons are long dead, and his three tall, comely daughters (Amaerathae, Galonquill, and Nithimra) have tastes every bit as hearty as his. So all of the Hawkyns enjoy their revelry, and over the years they have become accomplished singers and dancers, able to drink prodigiously without becoming tipsy, stay bright and alert for hours, and effortlessly make small talk. Little or nothing can shock or scandalize them, and they've become shrewd judges of character.



Hawkyns revels always feature skilled harpists, singers, and other small groups of musicians who wander and play. They also usually include "spectacles," troupes of actors hired to portray bawdy pirates come a-raiding, or adventurers seeking treasure hidden in Hallowturrets, but cursed by a shapeshifting magic that gives them serpent heads, tails, or scales from time to time. Occasionally minor wizards will act as clowns, portraying great but dunderheaded archmages who get everything wrong when they start hurling spells about. There's even been at least one "zombie ball," where mages competed to animate undead to create the most skillful and beautiful dancers.

I'm told there are more than sixty servants at Hallowturrets, plus at least twenty battle-experienced mansion guards. Servants are trained to quietly drift in with drinks, but otherwise stay unnoticed unless an alarm is raised. Gongs are placed here and there about the mansion, notably at the head and foot of all of the many spiral stairs.

Entertainment is always informal, with guests being encouraged to wander around as they please. This always results in small groups of Athkatlans murmuring business deals or gossip, and lovers heading for seclusion. Guests who want to keep their meetings unseen creep

around in search of a rendezvous—usually stalked by an interested Hawkyns or two—and gawking visitors walk for miles in the magnificent rooms until they get lost.

There are spells to guard against arson or accidental fires, but the Hawkyns frankly don't care about thefts; what matters it, they say, when you've money enough to replace it all thousands of times over? Some guests even learn that Hallowturrets has at least a dozen secret passages, the inevitable hauntings, and one real lost treasure.

Years ago, one visitor saw a pillar being taken down when a Hawkyns needed money in a hurry. It proved to be hollow and yielded up thousands of gold coins. But the lost treasure I refer to isn't the vast stores of Hawkyns wealth. The treasure is magic.

Somewhere in the walls of Hallowturrets is the desiccated corpse of Hoathur Dareiel, an apprentice mage. Presumably his corpse still clutches a spellbook whose contents were far beyond his powers—and whose magics keep it hidden from all attempts to trace it. Hoathur stole the huge, heavy tome, reputed to contain over three hundred spells, from an archmage visiting Hallowturrets. He then took a secret passage unfamiliar to him to make his escape. He became trapped there when none of the doors out of the passage would open—doors whose whereabouts





and secrets were known only to Drustin Hawkyns, who'd died mere days before. The archmage Bhaeren Huldinarr, bereft of his spells, was promptly slain by a rival.

Now, not a year passes without at least one suitably disguised Red Wizard of Thay, as well as any number of ambitious Athkatlan, Calishite, and Tethyrian mages, slipping into a revel or two to try their luck at finding the lost book. Workers occasionally tear down this wall and build onto that wall—but no trace of Bhaeren's tome is found. (If anyone found it, years back, the book was spirited away without anyone learning about its discovery.)

Most large old buildings acquire, like cloaks of ivy, tales of ghosts and strange happenings—but thousands of revel guests (including your humble scribe) have seen the apparitions of Hallowturrets House. Most often seen is a dark, cowl-robed human figure that glides silently and purposefully along passages and galleries, bearing in one bony hand the staring severed head of a man. This grisly relic drips blood copiously, but its gore never seems to reach the floor. No one has ever seen the face of this phantom; the one bard who tried often to do so gazed only into an empty cowl.

Other guests speak of a chill wind that whispers cryptic warnings in their ears, and still others have seen

a disembodied, floating female human head that glares menacingly at them as it flies about. If attacked or touched by any sort of magic, its eyes melt away into empty sockets, and it gives a great despairing wail as it rushes at its attacker, thereafter to vanish. Local legend insists that yet another ghost appears only to those who carry the blood of the Hawkyns in their veins—but none of that normally jovial family will speak of such matters.

The Hawkyns themselves are delightfully informal and friendly folk, and the walls and pillars of their overlarge home contain some very splendid relief carvings. If the visitor can spare time for a revel, Hallowturrets is not to be missed.

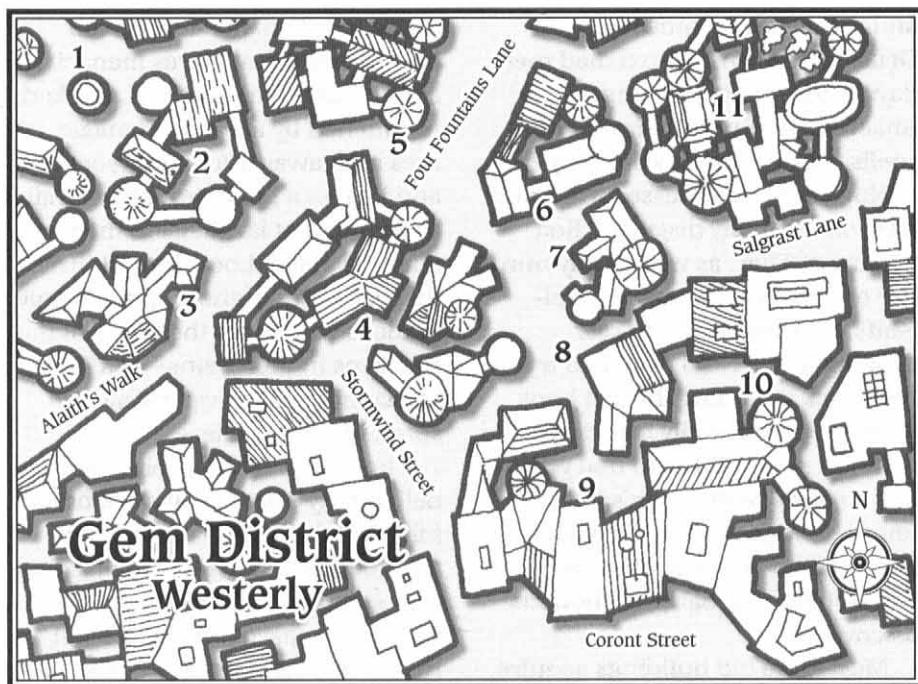
## **Tavern**

### **The Adamantine Mug**



This clean, newly rebuilt tavern is an oasis of reasonable prices in a sea of glittering ostentation. The Mug has been discovered by, or established expressly for, the up-and-coming merchants of Athkatla. In some ways the staff and clientele here are as secretive as if this was some sort of private club.

Here merchants come just to be seen entering Gem District, drinking and dining upon nicely spiced cheesebreads and snail and mussel pastes whose flavor owes overmuch to sea salt and a heavy hand with



### Map Key

1. Flamewater Fountain (meeting place, haunt of daystreet scent sellers and makeup "touchover lasses")
2. House of Jalsra Fourwynds, retired adventuress (active investor and information gatherer and seller)
3. Shadowgates House (private club for Athkatlan females of wealth and breeding, where—as most in the city say—"old crones go to party and say nasty things in private")
4. Dancing Dolphins House (mansion)
5. Hallowturrets House (mansion)
6. House of Velrack Worthgar "the Roaring Giant," retired seacaptain and active investor (not-so-secretly backing privateering vessels who sink specific prey, to order)
7. House of Tholondor Ivryn (sage: Amnian mercantile history, genealogies, and investments)
8. The Diamond Dragon (jewelry shop)
9. Myrtel's Stargirt Wonders (shop)
12. House of Darsarl Rastable (investor, bon vivant, and duelist for hire)
11. Crimmordown Turrets (mansion)



the spices. They talk of weather, exchange gossip, and arrange business meetings to be held elsewhere using a wild array of private codes.

Silence greets the stranger, for all strangers are likely to be spies for foreign costers or the wealthiest merchant houses of Amn, sent here to crush upstart competitors. Buying a round of drinks gains one temporary acceptance as a "friend." You'll be the sort of friend, it should be said, that means "easy-touch target" to most Athkatlans.

Silence also greets anyone who tries to open negotiations for any sort of trade, or asks the whereabouts of anyone not actually in the Mug at the time. Or, for that matter, anything to do with commerce at all, beyond the barest request for where one can procure a needed item or service. "Seek the street," those who press about such matters will be told curtly.

The Mug, you see, is the place for the up-and-coming to demonstrate that they've "made it" to such an extent that they don't have to grub after coins each and every moment of the day. The location of this tavern means they might expect to pay twice the going rate or more for every drink set before them, but even obvious outlanders will discover that everything here is a shade underpriced, from the nuts to the elverquisst. There's no catch; the owner, Jaranatha Rylivvin, is wise enough to know that keeping

things reasonable will keep the Mug popular, the drinks flowing, and her coffers full.

Jaranatha is a pleasant, rather gaunt lady of short stature, a hawk-like nose, and hair that's an unruly cascade of silver ringlets. Preferring dark gowns and a few pieces of splendid silver jewelry to the overly generous displays favored by most Athkatlans of means, she is polite and friendly to her patrons. She misses nothing in the Mug, and guests feel that her eyes see all. Jaranatha has two sons, a half-brother, and a loyal staff of ten former mercenary warriors to serve drinks and keep order. She's known to keep a loaded hand crossbow and a *rope of entanglement* behind the bar, as well as a handful of "flour-globes." These very fragile bubble-glass spheres filled with flour temporarily blind anyone using bows or darts in the Mug.

Jaranatha has a seldom-seen silent partner: Thuala Benflaeve, a slightly older, taller woman of wry and ever-present humor but a firm love of order. When she visits the Mug, she can always call on a dozen well-armed bodyguards should disciplinary action be required.

What very few folk suspect is that Jaranatha overhears as much as she can with the aid of a magical earring she takes off only when sleeping. Moreover, she keeps a small jar of enchanted copper dust



behind the bar; those carrying any trace of it on their clothing or person can be listened to by means of the earring for about a day, regardless of how distant they may be from Jaranatha.

She's learned a lot of the code-phrases used by her regular patrons, and can anticipate when business meetings she would like to eavesdrop upon will take place. If nothing interesting seems imminent, she will always "dust" any strangers (those who might be mages or adventurers, in particular) to provide herself with some entertainment.

Jaranatha has kept this ability secret thus far by acting subtly. Her investments are the only response to what she learns, and she sells information only about outlander adventurers. Nevertheless, this hidden edge has been enough to make her very wealthy in only a handful of years—wealth she has used to purchase mansions in Wave and Temple Districts for rent or later sale.

So long as one bears in mind that the Mug offers no privacy, even for a day after one visits, this tavern offers clean and uncramped surroundings whose decor echoes the showrooms of many silversmiths. There's too much glittering trim, too many needless railings, and too many gigantic, overdone metal "spreading leaf" flourishes on wall-sconces and all fittings. The ornate

windows display drinkers seated in them; the window seats are always the first to be seized, and are rarely vacant at any time of day.

The Mug is too quiet to mask sensitive converse, and it closes early—well before dawn, that is. Serving wenches are matrons and men rather than comely lasses, but the service is both swift and attentive. The cellar is broad in selection and deep in quality; the quaffs served are large.

## **Shops**

### **Myrtel's Stargirt Wonders**



Athkatlans are fast acquiring the Calishite love of attractive items that bear minor enchantments. But it's not surprising that shops selling magical wares are so few, given the Council's control over magic and the attitude of many Amnians and Tethyrians toward sorcery.

I suspect agents of the Council, the Shadow Thieves, and various wizardly organizations of Faerûn keep a close watch on the origins, identities, and current activities of both the proprietor of this establishment and his clientele. Please bear that in mind if you go seeking this shop. Its front bears its name in raised letters of silver, with a star above and below, set upon a windowless front wall of mirror-polished black marble. Its door is enchanted so as to seem fashioned



of the same stone.

This tall and narrow shop is crowned by three floors of apartments rented to folk I strongly suspect are mages of varying skills. One of them told me that tenants receive low rental rates in return for promises to use their "skills" against intruders who seek to steal, set fires, or break things. It seems this is no longer a frequent occurrence, after several dramatic demonstrations of the enthusiasm of these live-in guardians. Where most professional procurers would hire clumsy dupes to draw the fury of such guardians, then sneak in back as the battle raged, it seems the resident mages spotted such tactics and struck mercilessly at the professionals. From the gory tale related to me, I suspect some of these residents are powerful mages indeed, not mere novices.

Proprietor Sasrelintar Myrtel is a soft-spoken, raven-haired, dark-skinned, handsome man of about five feet in height, with large and arresting brown eyes, features of almost childlike delicacy, and a deep love of acting mysterious. He claims to have come from Lantanna (though I've seen no other Lantanna of skin hue close to his) but to dislike things mechanical. Instead he delights in small magics, he says almost apologetically, catering to the Amnian love of things overblown, needless, and dramatic.

Others have told me that Myrtel

was once a very clever toymaker in Calimport until he displeased someone important there and had to flee—and that two of the many jeweled rings he wears are *rings of spell storing* of unusual power and capacity. He is known to have slain several would-be thieves, kidnappers, or assassins; he did not leave them alive long enough to discover which profession or intent was theirs. He moves with gliding grace, uncanny silence, and has an air of perpetual alertness.

Myrtel is thought to be a man of secrets, with covert connections to several "old money" Amnian families. Perhaps he's the rumored "small, dark, and silent man" who can procure flying ships for those with funds enough. Some say he serves the Council of Six, while others whisper of allegiances to the Shadow Thieves, or the Red Wizards of Thay, or to a hitherto unknown cabal of mages—or all four at once. Myrtel, of course, answers all hints, direct questions, and inferences with a silent smile.

The proprietor of the "Shop of Wonders" could of course be no more than what he seems: a man of minor magical powers, much interested in enchanted items, who has money to spare, good connections among salvagers of magic, and a style of seeming in touch with deep and mystical doings.

Myrtel runs the shop with an assistant, Drestan, who smiles more



than he speaks. He is bald, young, a head taller than his employer, and has eyes that are black and swimming with winking white stars. Drestan is utterly fearless, wears *ironguard* protection, and is capable of unleashing instantly fatal or damaging magics if attacked.

Moreover, it was whispered to me that Myrtel maintains a testing cavern beneath the shop—three cellars that became a single open space after a long-ago, explosively unfortunate experiment. The cavern is guarded from flooding by extensive spells and serves as safe, hidden storage and a proving ground for enchanted items.

I was unsurprised during my visit to discover that Myrtel's Stargirt Wonders is given over to much empty space, black velvet display cloaks under glass, and "sparkle-stones" that emit random winks and shimmers of light when touching real gemstones or rock crystals. High fashion gowns here magically alter to fit the wearer and make bellies seem smaller and busts larger. But the full range of goods sold by this shop is far more intriguing.

The usual potions can of course be purchased here; I suspect sales of the aforementioned gowns and healing draughts alone make Myrtel rich. Most such shops also do a roaring low-coin trade in hangover-, sleepiness-, and nausea-banishing concoctions, as well as the inevitable "love potions."

There were even a few low-charge wands on offer. I've heard the proprietor has been left unmolested to sell potentially dangerous wares here in the heart of Gem District largely because he agreed to stop making *wands of knock*, an item that strikes fear into the hearts of property-lovers everywhere—and Athkatlans in particular.

Let me present for the reader the roster of goods on display at the time of my visit:

- An impressive-looking stone golem, carved to resemble a hulking human warrior in full coat-of-plate armor, could be had for 75,000 danterers. But the buyer should be aware that it can't fight, carry, catch and hold, block passageways, or do anything else except open and close doors, booming "Welcome!" in a thunderous voice as it does so. It can discern which sort of creatures (by species) it should open the door for, but can neither deliver nor take messages, nor be made to perform its actions silently. It can perceive approaching creatures well enough so as not to actually strike anyone with a door, but not well enough to distinguish between desired entrants and undesirables, so long as their general appearance is correct.
- Four highly polished moonstone pillars were on offer at 12,000 danterers each. Obviously salvaged from elsewhere, they were broken at top and bottom, but set in new bases to stand solidly upright. Each probably





weighs as much as five or six men, and they could readily be used as ornamental room pillars or as the uprights of a huge four-poster bed. Whenever touched by a living being, they glow a pale blue-white, brightly enough to read by, but over about ten minutes, this radiance slowly fades to nothing in a process that can't be arrested or hastened. They don't respond to another touch until dark once more.

- On display was a cloak that was such a deep purple in color as to seem black. The cloak, which was cowed and long enough to sweep the ankles of the mannequin, was on offer for 60,000 danters, despite the fact that it has only one magical property. The wearer can by silent act of will cause it to appear as I saw it or change to one of two other appearances: black and covered with glowing copper-hued gems that aren't really there; or translucent, like black gauze, to reveal what is beneath. Each shift in state can be gradual or instant, and the wearer can choose to control the cowl separately (for instance, covering the face while revealing the rest of the body). Very rare and very popular, Myrtel insisted.
- Myrtel seemed most pleased with an exquisitely crafted and lifelike metal bird, priced at a mere 195,000 danters. Intended to be worn strapped to the back or palm of a lady attending a revel, it can be made to seem iridescent, to glow a deep red, or to appear silver. In any of those forms,

its eyes—fashioned of gems—appear to move, blink, and hold an inner light of their own. Moreover, by the stroking of a certain feather, the bird can be made to flutter its wings, as if preparing to fly. Four tiny studs are located upon its underside, spaced to lie upon the knuckles or fingers of the wearer. Pressing three of these causes the jeweled bird to sing set tunes, and the fourth causes it to deliver a twelve-second message recorded earlier. The message, delivered in the exact voice, tones, and inflection of the person who prepared it, can be repeated as often as desired. Messages can be anything vocalized by someone touching the bird, directly after they utter a secret command word, which is not heard as part of the message. Myrtel will furnish it the secret word only to a buyer who has paid in full. He demonstrated the bird for me (I fear I may have misled him somewhat as to my identity and wealth), and it was both beautiful and impressive.

- Among Myrtel's other wonders was a large oval mirror, in whose depths appears a handsome male human face. Upon utterance of a certain triggering word by the owner of the mirror, this face will say calmly, "As you command." Myrtel hadn't yet priced this; although it seemed the mirror did nothing more magical than this single impressive effect, he wasn't yet certain what it was. Perhaps it allows someone or something unknown to spy out through the mirror, cast



spells out through it, or even to use the mirror as a portal; Myrtel was unwilling to price or sell the mirror until he was more certain.

### **The Diamond Dragon**



The visitor to Athkatla might well expect to find jewelry shops in Gem District—and would not be disappointed. There are a dozen or so, all of them very expensive (up to ten times prices elsewhere) and very exclusive. After all, as the saying goes, “An Athkatlan is proud to pay more.”

Collectively, as the local saying goes, these establishments “make Gem District glitter.” They include Sarango’s, Nelvoullyn’s, The House of the Brightest Star, Bleyvnsoar House, Fallenstar Fine Gems, and Starnir’s Pool of Jewels.

The most expensive of these most exclusive of gem shops is The Diamond Dragon (I was lectured severely on the necessity, when naming it, to always include that “The”). It takes its name from the—er, “The”—showpiece that dominates its entry lobby: a crystal case that holds a lifelike, man-sized, reclining dragon sculpted from a single gigantic diamond!

This literally priceless exhibit is not for sale, I was told, unless perhaps I was willing to part with a small but verdant kingdom, fortified with a capable standing army,

in exchange for it. The mere idea of such a trade fires the imagination, but unfortunately your humble scribe had no such realms up his sleeve, though I’ve fled from such often enough.

So I was forced to pass within and examine more everyday wares. “Everyday,” that is, to those willing to pay twice or thrice what Waterdhavian buyers part with for the precise same stones.

Case after case holds those things that Athkatlans hold most dear: rings, bracelets and anklets, pectorals, and bracers. All of them drip with thumb-sized or larger stones, all of them are overdone by the standards of jewelers elsewhere, and all of them are set in brightly polished or enameled metals that endlessly scream, “Look at me! Over here! You can’t possibly match this!” which I fear I found too depressingly Amnian. (“Subtle” to a citizen of Athkatla probably means wearing only two such pieces at a time.)

The owner of The Dragon is Valivaert Melormedon, a tall, one-eyed man of silver-white wavy hair, distinguished features, and an unreadable expression. Some whisper that he’s a former pirate, or a Tethyrian noble who somehow escaped the bloodletting in that land. He dresses in robes or the codpiece, hose, and high boot combination favored by the young. But whatever his garb, its color is always a single dark hue.

He carries a thin black rod that



I've been told is magical. One man attested that it summoned a golem or animated stone beast out of nowhere to fight for him, but another man disagreed, saying he'd seen it allow Melormedon to fly and blast foes with fire at the same time.

Whatever the truth, the smooth and saturnine Melormedon isn't telling. He's known to have once used magic to whisk him away from a slaying and instantly substitute an unfortunate servant in his place. But many Athkatlans of wealth have purchased powerful enchanted items that can do as much. I've also heard that several cabals and organizations in the city have tried to learn more about Melormedon—in vain, and to their cost.

The Dragon's staff deftly and politely served me, endlessly murmuring praises of my unlovely form and the jewels they intended to bedeck it in. Both male and female employees were splendid specimens, their stunning beauty very much on display because their garb seemed to be made up entirely of gems riding on very fine wires. All of them possessed musical, mellifluous voices that could charm a furious dragon into dalliance and friendship.

I was told later, by a regular patron, that the proprietor of The Dragon safeguards the loyalty of his staff by hiring only ugly or mutilated people who have pleasant voices and manners. A powerful and

nameless wizard, Melormedon's silent partner, embeds in them enchanted gemstones giving those who bear them beauty—and also allowing the proprietor or the wizard to trace the whereabouts of each staffer. Magic can end their lives at will by causing the gems, placed deep and near the heart, to explode. Certainly the service here was softly deferential where in some rival shops it would have been haughty.

There are even rumors that Melormedon is a powerful mage in his own right, and has no mysterious wizard as a partner. Or that he fronts for a magically gifted Athkatlan family who somehow keep their powers secret from the Council—or include in their ranks a member of the Council.

Melormedon can summon bodyguards from behind concealed panels and rear doors in an instant, should any unpleasantness erupt in the shop. Whenever trouble seems larger than an annoyance of the moment, a band of warriors bristling with weapons and alert menace appears, with an elderly, inscrutable man in their midst: one Ornsagaun Trillis by name. This might well be Melormedon's wizard partner, but Trillis only smiles when asked about himself, his dealings with The Dragon, and his possible powers. And his smiles are neither welcoming nor friendly.

All of the gem shops in Athkatla



will, of course, make jewelry to order, both to fit their patrons and to follow the latest fashions. Dyeing stones to change their hue to a vivid ruby, and incidentally ruining their value in the process, was the rage when I was last in the city, for example. The Dragon is no exception.

The specialty here is gem-studded masks, which are made full-sized for the face and in miniature to cover other body areas. There are also gem and skin-glued gauze "tattoos" or even slave-brands to adorn the face. An "out of the case" mask is likely to sell for 40,000 danter for the most drab and up to ten times that for a really splendid piece, with most in the 120,000- to 160,000-danter range. Custom masks begin at 60,000 for the most stark and drab design imaginable. They rise swiftly to 150,000 the moment more than a handful of gemstones are incorporated into the design.

The prices made me dizzy, but at least The Dragon dispenses with much of the hauteur encountered elsewhere in the Athkatlan gem trade, where one seems to pay small fortunes for the privilege of being sneered at. In decor—once one gets past the dragon sculpture and the garb of the staff—this shop is more typical of its type. One sees gilded statues everywhere wearing display pieces, and the rest of the thickly carpeted space is dominated

by clever reflected lights, mirrors for customers to preen in front of, and the ever-present glass display cases.

According to my source, the proprietor of The Dragon also sells gems of lesser size and quality to the poorest of Athkatlans, by private arrangement, allowing them to pay in tiny every-tenday installments that seem to continue forever. This allows citizens to share a gem and the payments for it. Useful for important social occasions—so long as they can arrange to observe different social occasions from one another, that is.

This most prominent of Athkatlan gem shops is a recommended attraction for the traveler's eye because it captures, in so many ways, the essence of the Amnian people.

### **Blevynsoar House**

Though it lies in the heart of the Gem District, this jewelry shop is not known for its glittering baubles (quite forgettable by Athkatlan standards), but for treasure of another sort. The maps sold in the back room fetch a king's ransom when offered to the right buyer.

The proprietor, Jared Blevyn, began his career as an apprentice buyer for the Zhanye family of gemmerchants. During his travels to appraise and acquire diamonds for his Zhanye masters, Blevyn scrupulously mapped every crossroad,



footpath, and roadside inn along his journeys. His interest in cartography grew, and he avidly sought out maps of lands beyond his own travels.

One fragmentary map, Parlek's Folly, held tantalizing clues to a vast hoard of gems, and Blevyn was eventually able to cross-reference this tiny scrap with others in his collection and claim the treasure for himself. The treasure enabled Blevyn to open his own shop, where Parlek's Folly hangs in a gilded frame to this day.

Every traveler can gain much from Blevyn's store of maps, but he'll not part with them cheaply.

Nor does he permit browsing of his collection—"maps only have value if they haven't been copied a hundred times," he says. But the mere mention of a location anywhere is Faerûn is enough to send him scurrying into a back room, soon to return with an armful of scroll tubes. Many adventurers owe their lives and fortunes to Blevyn's accurate, detailed maps.

Blevyn is also willing to purchase maps from adventurers he trusts. (And with his encyclopedic knowledge of geography, Blevyn is hard to fool with fake maps.) Amateur cartographers who sell a map to Blevyn can expect a thousand questions



from the "Mapmaster of Amn," whose notes and annotations will soon take up all the available margin space on his new acquisition.

Occasionally, Blevyn will even commission a group of seasoned explorers to draw up a map of a particularly dangerous locale. These expeditions are becoming more frequent lately, and Blevyn tells me he's thinking about forming an "explorers and cartographers' guild" to expand the reach of his maps even further.

While he may be a shrewd judge of maps, he's less perceptive when it comes to character. I tried to sell him several maps, but he had the audacity to question my recollection of even the most basic landmarks! Worse, he intimated that my "reputation" had preceded me! Only the truly fine maps he'd just sold me assuaged my righteous outrage.

## Temple

### The Dome of the Rose



One of the most graceful buildings in over-ornamented Gem District is the slender, simple temple and monastery of Lathander. Set in a walled orchard and garden, the Dome of the Rose is a square building whose windows all face east.

Its ground floor is a room wider, all around, than the upper levels, with a glass-roofed conservatory on the east and south sides of the

building, and storage cellars on the north and west sides. From this lowest floor, curving walls sweep up to the more slender upper levels, giving the building a grace not often attained in the City of Coin. There are two levels above the ground level, but all levels in the temple have ceilings twice the height of most residences, making the Dome impressively tall. It is named for caps atop its central atrium: a magnificent construction of rose-hued glass that glows at sunrise, flooding the entire holy house with light.

Citizens enter the Athkatlan temple of the Morninglord from the west or north; only the monks may go in by the garden gates to the east and south. Mornmaster Thaddin Dawnhunter is head of the Dome, and tries—very successfully, for the most part—to keep it an oasis of tranquility amid the bustle of commerce. Here, the truly devout believer in Lathander (for the doorpriests seem able to see the hearts and minds of visitors) can rest, pray, meditate, and seek guidance in matters both temporal and spiritual.

Penitents should be aware that the Mornmaster has little business experience or aptitude, and that his advice, like that of any of the fourteen monks of the Dome, is apt to be far more pious than worldly. Six of the eight priests who dwell here, however, and the same number





among the lay followers, are learned in both the history and politics of Amn, and can speak shrewdly as to what a person or organization is likely to do in the year ahead.

Brother of the Light Haladso, in particular, was in his day a pirate in the Nelanther, a merchant captain plying the Sword Coast from Neverwinter to Calimport, and a courtier in Suzail. Haladso is nobody's fool and has outsmarted several wily Athkatlan merchants in trade disputes with the temple in recent years.

Sister Moraeda Dawnduth, an orphan raised by Lathanderite clergy, is said to be "touched by the god," she seems able to sense unerringly when visitors speak falsely, and even to know some of their innermost thoughts. Many Athkatlans are so afraid of her that they no longer worship in the temple, fearing that the Lathanderites will do as any other true Amnian would: Sell what Moraeda learns to those who can profit most by it. In this belief they are probably wrong, but I cannot speak to this as a true follower of the Morninglord would. I do not know whether, in this regard, the clergy treat devout faithful of Lathander differently than others who come into their temple.

Only high-ranking clergy of Lathander visiting the city for a month or less, or devout worshipers of the Morninglord on pilgrimage to Athkatla, may stay here. Most residencies are of three nights or less, and pilgrims are expected to make a handsome donation to the temple (of at least 50 gp value for each night they intend to stay). Guests receive simple but hearty meals of wine, bread, and a nourishing soup or stew, and a clean, comfortable bed with relative privacy and quiet (though there's no escaping the ever-present sung hymns to the glory of Lathander, and no secure storage for belongings).

The most spectacular daily observance in the Dome, after the Awakening to the Glory at sunrise, is the Leavetaking at dusk. Leavetaking is a giving of thanks with wine set afire on the altar and treated to give off rose-hued flames; the ceremony is so mournful in its chant and song as to move many who hear it to tears, regardless of their faith. Be aware that the gates of the temple are shut after dusk; the ritual includes their solemn closing.

This temple has a meager library but a superior herb garden, from which it sells small quantities for stiff prices. Its clergy are competent healers.



# Zehoarastria



his formal, little-used scholarly term refers to all of Amn between the Trade Way and the sea. Its name is

derived from the often-swampy Zehoarast flood plain that lies between the Trade Way, which runs along the edge of higher ground, and the sea between the Esmel and the Small Teeth.

In spring, the most desperate upland shepherds waded into the wash brought down by the spring floods, seeking nuggets of gold and

silver brought down from the mountains by the Specie.

The rest of Faerûn should give heartfelt thanks for Zehoarast. If so much of this land wasn't swampy or apt to flood or covered in stinking quicksand, Amn would long ago have built one vast, sprawling tall-spired city along the entire shore between the Cloud Peaks and the Small Teeth. Then the city would have bled the rest of the Realms dry equipping all the citizens living therein with the latest fads.



Imagine jeweled birds that sing by enchantment; pay 200 gold pieces a month for another song to be added to the repertoire, and make your musical selections by pulling on select metal feathers. I do not lie; you can get these in the Gem District of Athkatla right now.

Or gilded, but still edible, fruit. I wonder how many of these you have to eat before a thieves' guild, probably working with the fruit vendor to keep accurate accountings, thinks it worthwhile to cut you open and extract your stomach for the gold therein. But I grow wroth.

This long waterfront of Amn is the only part of the "Land Where Coins Are All" that I was able to cover in this guidebook, beyond, of course, glittering Athkatla itself. All travelers whose purses do not make them stagger as they walk should be thankful: Amn is not a land for the penniless or the spendthrift. It boasts all too many thieves of both the legal variety and the well-armed skulker sort. Wealthier travelers find it hard to relax and enjoy any journey or stay in the Realm of Gold.

Descriptions of some of the major features of this region follow. Travelers are warned that money shouts in Amn, rather than just talking. Establishments and business customs may change with bewildering rapidity, so treat everything I say hereafter as written in wet sand on a stormy beach, with the tide coming in.

## **Alandor River**

Slow, wide, and usually covered in barges whenever the rime of winter ice hasn't sent them to their beaches, this river is said to be the backbone of Amn's wealth and mercantile traffic. Its water is green and smells—not strongly, but enough to make the prudent think twice about quaffing it heartily.

The most numerous fish in the Alandor are tiny silverwink minnows, upon which palm-sized brownscales dine. The brownscales in turn serve as meals for the black and greedy Alandor eels, and old men fish for these disgusting things by jigging worm balls from every bridge and dock. I've tried Alandor eels, and not even handfuls of pepper and gallons of lemon juice can rescue the rubbery taste of dead fish.

The traveler can take a barge or use the road along the south bank of the Alandor between Athkatla and Crimmor. Above that, the barges continue up the Alandor to Lake Weng and its cities. But the Lake Way road veers south on its run east to Amnwater, and thence to points east.

## **Arnise Hold**

Among the many small hamlets to be found across Amn's farmlands wherever trails meet, only upland moots tend to boast fortifications. Usually all that remains are crumbling ruins of baronial holds from



the days when Amn was ruled by the sword, not the coin, and farmers looked to the protection of a self-styled local lord who ruled as far as his blade could reach.

Arnise Hold is the sole exception I know of in the coastal lands. Other keeps are held by powerful families to anchor and defend their extensive farmlands, vineyards, or granaries, but the Arnise family have been professional warriors for some generations. They have kept their tiny keep in good repair, treating the local farmers who look to them very much as the olden-day "sword lords" of upland Amn did. There's nothing of note to be found in Arnise Hall except a keep that offers an interesting lookout (though one would have to invited to the family table to be allowed up to the battlements) and a guesthouse built along the outside of the walls.

The Arnise hospitality comes with good stabling and generous feed for mounts and pack animals, though livestock aren't welcome. But the guesthouse is, well, rather rustic. Dark inside and well worn, it's apt to be cool in summer and positively icy in fall, winter, and spring.

Guests are provided with thick fur coverlets and surprisingly good food—typically a good honest trencherful of stew or roast game that will fill the starving. The usual fried "hack" (smoked fish and bacon

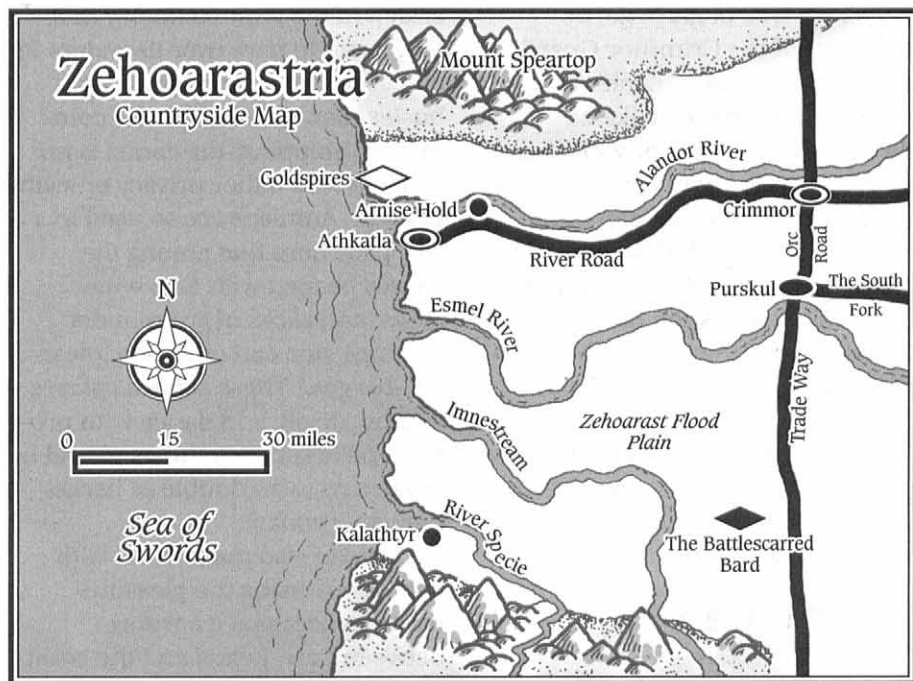
slices) and boar dumplings (a mainstay of the slender-pursed) are here delights. The special dishes of barley tossed with grilled mushrooms and greens, and simple bowls of diced apples, strong cheese, almonds, and greens, please and fill the belly. I've eaten such at many small hamlets in Amn, but seldom is food so deftly prepared. Small beer and water (parsley-flavored or plain) are the only drinkables to be had, but there's no objection to drinking your own stronger fare. Drunks will be relocated from the guesthouse to the "strongstallion stalls," virtual prisons built to withstand the hooves of young stallions trying to kick their ways to freedom.

A stay costs a very reasonable 2 sp a head, provender included, with beer an extra copper a cup. Stabling, with fodder and grooming, is 4 sp per animal.

## **Crimmor**

This smallish, crowded, always-noisy city of ugly buildings is the caravan center of Amn and an eyesore few travelers can manage to miss. It huddles inside crumbling walls on the south bank of the Alandor, surrounded by piles of its own garbage that are home to squawking storms of scavenger birds, armies of rats, and snakes that prey on the rats.

Be warned: Snake soup is a local delicacy here. If ever you don't recognize what's in a bowl set in front



of you, that's what it is. Worse, some dining houses think it good fun to leave intact snake heads in the broth for diners' spoons to find.

Crimmor is a nest of swindlers, moneychangers, and shady warehouses that's surprisingly free of outright theft. It's also bereft of much charm or culture beyond frequent and noisy parades of musicians and dancers. The town is named for a long-dead local landowner and successful merchant, I believe, though there seems to be some disagreement about this.

I'd say more about it if I was welcome in the place, but I fear other pens than mine will have to lay

Crimmor's glories before interested readers. Due to a misunderstanding with one of the more prominent and sinister Crimman families, I stand under the threat of "hookfingers" if I ever return.

Hookfingers, a punishment for artists, forgers, scribes, and coin-clerks who've offended, consists of being hung from the walls for a set time by means of eel-hooks driven through all of one's fingers and thumbs. The weight of most bodies tears one free, ruining digits and making future writing either impossible or painful lifelong.

Those who do fall are greeted forty to sixty feet below, as they land on a beaten dirt track around the walls



that's kept free of garbage, by members of the Crimmor Guard armed with cudgels. Each of the guards is allowed to strike an offender six blows, though fast-tongued scribes who have valuables on their persons can often escape more than half of these strikes through bribery, traditionally condoned in such cases. Guardsmen of the city can be readily recognized by the high-backed, rigid maroon leather jacks of armor they wear, which protect the rear of the head and neck. The armor has given them the nickname "Lobsterlouts."

## Esmel River

Draining Lake Esmel westward to the sea, this is the true backbone of Amnian riches. Hot and sulfurous springs near Esmeltaran warm the Esmel for a mile or so downstream and impart a sharp, chalklike "irontang" taste. I was promised it does no harm to one's innards.

As an old local saying goes, "The Esmel is more easily walked across than swum." This refers not to sandbars or floodwrack, but to the barges that sometimes crowd the river so thickly that one can walk from bank to bank by means of barge-decks—with the aid of an occasional plank, drawbridge, or swing-rope.

The broad, slow waters of the Esmel make it an ideal bargeway. From time to time these ungainly

craft jam the river so thickly that they seem to pave over its waters in one long, thin-spined city. Even busier than the Alandor for commercial shipping, the Esmel is no place to seek either privacy or swift passage. Amnians are so used to a lazy pace here that among the barges heaped with fish, wine-casks, and sacks of grain under awnings, one can often see "pleasure-barges." These serve as places to dine, drink, and dance with professional dancers to tunes played by musicians (who double as barge-crew and cooks).

One can also make deals with merchants using the pleasure-barge as personal transport between Lake Esmel and the coast. Travelers should beware: Not for nothing is the term "river merchant" synonymous with "swindler."

A score or more nameless farming hamlets and villages straggle along the banks of the Esmel, so laborers can be seen dipping water from it constantly. Village children often applaud particularly luxurious barges, hoping wealthy owners will dispense largesse.

I myself saw a bored merchant fling twenty or more gold coins to youngsters ashore, usually flicking them just far enough out of reach that the children would have to launch themselves out over the water to catch them, then splash down spectacularly. When he ran out of coins, the merchant





contented himself with hurling buttered lake crabs from a platter he'd been nibbling away at. These were eagerly and thankfully received, sometimes with cries of, "Waukeen sees and smiles upon ye, grand sir! Have thanks!"

The slowness of river travel often leaves the barge-borne easy targets—so, after several nasty massacres and dozens of assassinations, it has become unlawful to bear a strung bow or cocked crossbow within half a mile of either bank of the Esmel.

Amnian troops enjoy enforcing this rule. If the offender looks to be a warrior or adventurer, they enthusiastically swarm for a little bloodletting. If the miscreant is an ignorant outlander merchant or the bodyguard of same, it's customary to force a large bribe in lieu of punishment.

## **Innestream**

Despite its name, this is a full-fledged river, cold and swift. It plunges through many rapids and cascades for most of its run and is one of the most beautiful rivers to look at in all the Sword Coast. The Innestream grows as muddy as everything else when it reaches the Zehoarast flats. But until then it is excellent for drinking, washing, and fishing. Bluefin and silverback are easily speared or netted in the "plungepools" and flumes that force them into certain spots in the

water. But its turbulence makes it impossible to navigate with even the smallest boat or raft.

The Innestream empties out of the Small Teeth through a series of flower meadows, rockpiles, and small but thick stands of trees. It's beautiful country, dotted by many small stone cottages near the river, but no proper farms or great houses appear until one reaches the floodplain.

The river represents a small, unspoiled corner of Amn, though knowing the coin-hunters of this land, they'll not leave it unspoiled for long. The moment someone thinks that a mill might earn some handsome coin, or a weir might take fish enough to be worth the trouble, the Innestream may change for the worse. Thankfully, no gold or silver has ever been found in this river or its tidal wash (unlike the nearby Specie), so the Innestream remains free of armed men prowling its banks.

Amnian lore whispers that a sorceress able to assume wraithform at will dwells in one of the higher, more remote riverside cottages. One sage called her a "were-watchghost," though that seems mere fancy. Others call her the Witch of Glavvim, after the adventurer she's supposed to have seduced and then murdered for his treasure. This mysterious lady is said to habitually hide in rather less young and lovely shapes, both as a



bearded woodcutter and an old crone. So treat any man or woman you may meet as a powerful, dangerous sorceress in disguise. It makes life interesting and wins continuous prudence.

## Kalathyr

Perhaps the fisherfolk who dwell in this straggle of damp, mold-reeking huts on stilts are used to ever-present, sucking mud, sea-chills and fogs, and swarms of stinging insects. But I'm not, and I hope never to be. This fishing village at the mouth of the Specie is home to perhaps two dozen families, yet can boast no inn. Visitors can sleep on the flat kitchen roof of the tavern, but that's a lot friendlier with the stingflies and bite-gnats of Kalathyr than I like to be.

All in all, Kalathyr is a good place to stay clear of, though I suspect its disgusting conditions aid smuggling by keeping watching eyes few and vigilance paltry.

Kalath fishermen bring home plentiful hauls of silverfin and flat, flavorful bottom-fish called burdolin, which look like rotting old seaweed but taste rich and stomach-warmingly pleasant. The silverfin are salted or pickled in barrels and shipped everywhere in Amn for the making of fishpaste and smoked fish tarts. The burdolin are a local staple, though their popularity on the feast platter is slowly growing in Athkatla and elsewhere

in Amn. Those who've tasted and enjoyed burdolin grow more numerous than those who've merely looked and shuddered.

Kalath folk know the few spots where the mud is truly dangerous and for the most part ignore the mud. They squelch about, towing flat-bottomed skiffs that sledge along the surface of the mud and haul provisions and tools back and forth for use and sale. Lantern lines serve as signals and attract perching seabirds that the children of the village, deadly shots with their slings, fell for cooking pots. Until you've eaten a Kalath feast of chopped and fried eels, shovelbills, mudfrogs, and gulls, you haven't lived. Then again, you probably haven't held your squirming guts and desired not to live a moment longer, either.

When the tidal waters recede, the Kalath mud reveals the mingled skeletons of a huge ship, now little more than ribs and a keel. Entwined around this hulk are the remains of the gigantic serpent of the seas, or "water dragon," that sank her in some long-ago struggle. The details of the combat and the name of the ship have both been lost, but the peculiar blue electrum coins of early Nimbral often wash up on these shores. Sometimes folk walking the beaches even find rings or gauntlets that bear old, fading magics.



## Orc Road

The part of Trade Way between Crimmor and Purskul, Orc Road is so named because it marks the path of many orc hordes into Amn from the Cloud Peaks (the last two were in 1235 and 1241 DR, leading to the large half-orc population in Purskul). The enslaved orc remnants of those invasions were put to work building and maintaining this stretch of road.

It's as busy as the rest of the Trade Way, which must be a great frustration to members of the wealthy but never noble Amnian family of Gathalynker. It's said, and believed by the Gathalynkers at least, that about a century ago, one Lord Alathallgo Gathalynker was killed by some of his orc slaves and hastily buried somewhere under the road. The fat and brutal slave master was still in his enspelled armor, with enchanted rings on his fingers and magic swords, daggers, and wands belted around his waist. His severed head—by then, a skull in an ornate helm recognizably his—was recovered in 1312/ Yet his torso has never been unearthed. Family attempts to dig up the road have been imperiled by various Amnian officials and by the nighttime habits of sleepy drovers, who were wont to plunge their wagons right into the pits instead of following torchlit detours around.

The Gathalynkers are still at it,

much to the amusement of certain rival families. These rivals sometimes fill carts with nightsoil or kitchen-midden waste and send them along the Orc Road to be dumped onto the heads of diggers toiling in the current Gathalynker pit. One wonders whether the orcs buried their master somewhere else, or ate him so that they had only the magic to dispose of. Perhaps it all walked away on the body of a happy purchaser decades ago.

## Purskul

It embarrasses me to have to report this<sup>4</sup>, but the "Granary City" is another of the places in Amn where Volothamp Geddarm is less than welcome.

Accordingly, I can furnish the traveler with only a fragmentary overview of its features, which largely consist of granaries and half-orcs. The former include some of the oldest and largest stone and slate-roofed grain warehouses (wooden roofing is outlawed on granaries to lessen the risk of explosive fires). Most notable is the Grainhouse, an ancient, soaring stone tower mill and grain warehouse that's now the guildhall of the Granary Workers' Guild of Purskul and Outlying Villages.

Corn and cornflour flow out of Purskul by the wagon- and barge-load, and the local "half-tusk" population, descended from orc slaves,

<sup>4</sup>Elminster: Volo can be embarrassed? Ye gods, hearken and be amazed!



handles much of its flow. Their masters are, for the most part, halflings. Halfling families such as the Bruthaer, the Flagonsrich, and the Talltankards own most of Purskul. They seem—by impudence, hard work, and clever business innovations—to be holding the upper hand against the wealthy local human families, of whom the most successful are the Tharauders and the Thonoks.

Sturdy but plain is the local architecture. Many small walled gardens proclaim their owners' veneration of Chauntea, though the local chapel seems derelict. The visitor will see only a few grand houses, notably Tankardstall Hall, home of the Talltankards, who are wine traders and dabblers in many other things. Also a fine estate is Staerngates, seat of the Thonoks. Its builder and founder of the family, Staernel Thonok, was famous for his mercantile cleverness and wealth, but infamous for the researches into necromancy that may have won him unlife, or may have just robbed him of his life. Local rumor<sup>5</sup> insists that he still wanders underground granary passages, transformed into a frightening "thing."

A dispute over the quality of local wines Forced me to leave Purskul hastily with a price on my head, so I fear my coverage of local accommodations (almost exclusively used by merchants) is scanty. The haughty,

self-styled "Lord" Buckaladar Flagonsrich, master of the local Distillers' Guild, has a frightful temper.

Visitors should be wary of the half-orc Peace Patrol of Purskul—they wield spiked cudgels, iron bars, and battle scythes at the whim of local dignitaries. They're apt to forcibly confine passing travelers who interest them. Rich and important Athkatlans, or envoys of rich and nearby realms or the city of Waterdeep are apt to be apologetically released once their identities are established. But others may discover their visit to Purskan to be a rather long and harsh thing, particularly those who possess magic or feminine beauty, or those with much wealth and not much muscle in hand to retain it.

## Places of Interest in Purskul

### Inns

#### Owlroost Head



This rather rambling, haphazard old hostelry looks like exactly what it is: a series of old homes and older warehouses and shops rather clumsily connected by roofed passages. This mazelike, shabby old barn of a place is home to mice, rats, and cats that chase the vermin when they can be bothered, and lots of mismatched old furniture and eccentric old staff.

<sup>5</sup>Elminster: Correct, know ye.



It's also overpriced and lacking in services. Whatever confronts you when you open the door to your room is usually all you'll get. With a hipbath warmed by hot firestones only for the first dozen guests or so to order it, its rating is almost entirely earned by its dining room.

"Owlroost Head," a real hill many miles east of Purskul, was once a password of the Many-Fanged Serpent, a local secret society that met in the inn. The merchants and laborers of the Serpent struck back against unjust laws, rapacious visiting merchants, and corrupt rulers some centuries ago. They are thought to be defunct, though local acts of prankery, vandalism, and the occasional trade-dispute murder are still passed off as "acts of the Striking Serpent." One can still hear locals swear "By the Serpent!"

The Serpent-folk apparently "hid" a lot of stolen money by building a palatial dining hall here, which is undoubtedly the sole reason for Owlroost's longevity and present popularity. Cheerfully cloaked in Tethyrian green and the essential flame-yellow, its repainted glory effortlessly lifts the heart, and its viands positively caress the stomach. Wines are plentiful but seldom the same twice. Here follow but a few culinary highlights:

"Emerald Chicken" is a flame-leaping hotly spiced mix of chopped greens, onions, chicken livers, rice, and occasional chunks of the fowl it is named for. A perennial favorite, it vies for the palate with house dumplings. These are crisp-shelled and burst forth with juicy minced pork when bitten into. Have a cooling wine at hand!

Roasts and riverfish—often rather gritty eel—are frequent but unreliable alternatives. But one can make an entire meal of the "cloaks" served as accompaniment to every meal. Cloaks are fluffy, whipped<sup>6</sup> and fried potato, flavored with diced lemon, flowerbuds, and rosemary; yams stuffed with warm squid that has been boiled in lime juice laced with slices of lemon and many crushed mint leaves; and fried bones salad.<sup>7</sup>

Those with less coin to spend or time to dine are directed to "Ornabra." This goat, beef, and potato stew is drained to the point of dripping slowly, then wrapped in a flatbread as large as a small warrior's shield and served as a walking meal much favored by caravan travelers.

One never knows who one will meet with in Owlroost. By night it's a creaking place of shadows and little corners to lurk in. It once boasted evening companions on

<sup>6</sup> *Elminster*: Let me interpret. Ye would say "diced and then mashed," but we lack the dangerous things ye call blenders.

<sup>7</sup> *Elminster*: Ye would call these slices of taro and plantain, fried in batter. Tempura, is it not?



staff, but after some of these were unmasked as murderous doppelgangers, such ladies were banned and remain so.

### Stargath House



This quiet, well-appointed house of hospitality lurks behind a row of granaries and is flanked by its own stables. The visitor who can find it discovers a gem of an old manor house made over into a small but quietly comfortable inn.

Stargath House was once the home of Ulden Stargath, rebel—and ultimately the last—son of the once-wealthy and powerful Arklen family. Ulden disappeared decades ago, and the inn is run by a large band of semiretired adventurers who admit to no band name. The group includes a number of tall, graceful, and beautiful women in their ranks; Amaerel, Rathradauna, and Tristel particularly impressed me.<sup>8</sup>

Stargath House is known to have extensive cellars, locally thought to be where the adventurers now store their treasure, guarded by monsters they brought here as captives. Purskan legend insists that behind forgotten secret doors and “falling wall” traps in these cellars lie the remains of some of the aunts Stargath hated so much and lured there to their dooms.

As the tale goes, Ulden’s mother was one of five Arklen sisters who disappeared, one by one, soon after their dying father divided up his fortune among them. The treasure of gems, coins, and items of minor magic was stored in locked metal cash-boxes. Old Raervo Arklen placed the cash-boxes inside helmed horror guardians enchanted specifically to serve and protect each sister as an ever-present, gliding silent escort.

The descendants of the other Arklen sisters have long speculated that someone tampered with the spells that controlled the helmed horrors, because at least two sisters were forcibly taken out of their abodes by their escorts, at night. One of the helmed horrors was seen entering Purskul. Divination magic used to try to trace another sister yielded an image of her rigid, staring body, arms flung wide and frozen with mouth agape in a scream of astonished pain. She was transfixed on the outthrust sword of her own helmed horror, which had struck her from behind.

Whatever Ulden Stargath’s fate or evil deeds, his former home sets a good table. “Welcome Soup” proves to be a robust, steaming moot of smoked bacon and black bean swirled with thick cream and garnished with mint on top and chives below. One can instead have bowls of an even better alternative: cream

<sup>8</sup> *Elminster*: I really don't think we need to say how, do we?





of watercress with hickory-smoked apple. Superb!

"Purskul Platter" is a riot of pheasant, grouse, and smoked beef drowned in a rich, succulent gravy; little carving needed here. Nor is there with "Plate of Silver," tender and yielding grilled silverfin drizzled with raspberry juice and vinegar, and served with a small flanking mountain of onion and crab fried sliced potatoes. One can augment these with a vast plate of grilled calf's liver doused in zzar, mintjuice mash, and slices of lemon, or with a bowl of mussels in spicy vegetable broth, then finish up with sugared crispbreads and a blueberry jelly pot.

All in all, Stargath is a quiet hide-away for the traveler that proves a harbor for the palate.

## **Tavern**

### **The Black Sheaf**



This tavern is owned by the Thonoks, who enjoy a dark reputation, but much wealth and even greater influence thanks to their blood relationship to Lord Orgoth Vymmar of Athkatla. An overcrowded, raucous alehouse, the Black Sheaf has the best roadside location in Purskul and far too much popularity as a result. Elbow room in the Sheaf means some drunkard has fallen over, so there's temporarily room to swing elbows

before the hole left by his fall closes up.

Swinging elbows, fists, clubs, and chairs is a popular pastime in the Sheaf. Even the playful and nonbeligerent think it fair game to hurl hand-buns at any target they fancy. The Sheaf once boasted dancers, but no one dares brave the bruises these days, for lightly clad moving bodies atop tables proved to be irresistible targets.

The buns, by the way, are rounded, palm-sized loaves, branded on the top with the stylized sheaf badge of the tavern. These are baked with so much butter that they're golden-hued and delicious, and they are distributed free to the tables in a constant stream. But beware their excessive saltiness; they are intended to increase the sales of drinkables.

## **River Road**

Busy with groaning wagons day and night, this mud and gravel track carries even more traffic than the Alandor River beside it. In most places, the road runs along the edge of the riverbank, which as a result is constantly crumbling and sliding down into the river. Travelers on horseback or with pack animals swiftly grow frustrated and leave the slow, choked stream of wagons. This can sometimes be a mistake, given the increasingly clever brigands, who lurk wherever they can find a lookout over the



roadway and see far enough to think they can make a lightning stab and snatch before patrols can get to them.

The cleverest of the brigands is a small troupe known as the Redgloves. (No, I don't know the origin of the name—they've only worn red gloves once that I know of.) Numbering about a dozen, these bandits are masters of disguise and are known for their remarkably inventive ruses. Unlike common thugs that are quickly apprehended by patrols, the Redgloves have remained at large for almost three years now. This has earned them admiration from tale-tellers along the length of the River Road, and even the grudging admiration of the merchants and soldiers they've fooled. Their cleverness and willingness to take audacious risks is fast approaching legendary status, and it's difficult for your humble scribe to separate fact from fiction where the Redgloves are concerned.

This much is known: The Redgloves strike about once a month at the merchants that travel the River Road or the bargemasters along the Alandor. They've impersonated other merchants, a traveling circus, soldiers, and nobles on holiday to ingratiate themselves among their prey. Then, at a quiet, carefully chosen curve in the road, they'll reveal themselves and make off with an entire caravan's worth of goods.

Usually their victims are left unharmed but embarrassed. But when they draw their blades, the Redgloves are all business. Without a second thought, they'll slit the throats of anyone who makes them nervous.

Their most famous ruse duped Menaam Mehtodi, a merchant bearing six wagons of silk to Athkatla. Mehtodi was known to have dismissed tales of the Redgloves as "travel-rabble rubbish." Evidently this assessment found its way into the ears of the Redgloves.

While Mehtodi was two dozen miles outside Athkatla, his caravan was menaced by bandits wearing bright red gloves. A tense standoff ensued, with each side offering threats and imprecations. Then Mehtodi grinned from ear to ear and ordered his men to lay down their weapons, for he could see a patrol creeping up behind the bandits. He watched, joking with his guards, as the patrol made short work of the bandits.

After the dust settled, Mehtodi offered thanks to the patrol captain—only to find a dagger at his throat. The bandits rose, unharmed from the ground, and Mehtodi soon found himself relieved of his caravan—wagons and all! Mehtodi was reportedly so embarrassed that he hasn't been seen along the River Road since.

The practice of towing barges along the Alandor by teams of



horses or oxen is dying out amid the crowding and collisions of the roadway. Whip-wielding drovers often "accidentally" lash oncoming beasts or riders across their faces in order to clear the way, so some costers now habitually equip wagons with crossbowmen who raise their ready weapons warningly into view at every meeting with a drover using a long-lash. In severe winter weather, coaches stay off the roads.

The spring thaws turn the River Road into one long mud-wallow. Many oxen-teams are doomed to helpless slides and a drowning death in the river, thrashing, kicking, and entangled in their

harnesses—unless they can be freed by brave (perhaps that should more properly be "foolish") swimmers wielding knives. The muddy bottom of the Alandor must hold countless wagonloads, for boats deeper than barges quite often strike and scrape along underwater obstructions just upstream of Athkatla. Most of the lost goods are spoiled by immersion, of course.

Want to taste the dust and stink of Amn, endure days of jolting wagon travel, and hear all of the curses its more inventive hairy-handed drovers can spew? Hie thee to River Road, traveler, and join the slow groan there between Athkatla



and Crimmor. It's real danger in spring and on winter ice, and just plain old discomfort the rest of the time.

## River Specie

Less broken by rapids and falls than the nearby Imnestream, the mouth of this cold, swift river is crowded with fish and clams that like its cooling waters. But its upper reaches are crowded with dangerous, heavily armed men.

The Specie empties out of several cleft mountains in the Small Teeth, carrying nuggets of raw silver and gold. In Amn, the "River That Flows With Gold And Silver" is viewed as a sign of Waukeen's favor, at the very least—evidence that at least one god has touched Amn to tell all Faerûn that this is the favored place to live.

Or to die, if you come too close to whatever stretch of bank this or that Amnian regards as his. Tetherlines and rake-weirs are everywhere in the rushing waters, with wary men scrabbling in the numbing waters until they see someone approach. Then they sink their nuggets under the river in stone-anchored lockboxes and splash out to do battle, driving all visitors away with savage welcomes and sharp swords.

A lot of gold comes down the Specie, and probably more silver that is missed, broken into flecks amid gravel and sluiced out to sea

before it's spotted. Many eager men have sought the sources of the river, hoping to tunnel therein and mine in earnest, but all attempts thus far have attracted vicious and persistent peryton attacks from the cliffs of the Small Teeth. The expeditions have eventually reached caverns filled with explosive, stupefying gases that slay or *feeblemind* those not killed outright in the breaching-blasts. These deadly vapors drift out of the depths of the earth under the Small Teeth, never dissipating, and make mining impossible.

So the panning and squabbling goes on, below the mud, tripwires, springbows, and the crude fortresses of prospectors. To those who think taking an adventuring band along the river slaughtering the gold-seekers and replacing them with hired claim-holders is a good idea, be warned: It's been tried so often that there are special Amnian patrols to prevent it.

A specific death-penalty law prohibits such violence, or any attempt to concentrate ownership or band together in a collective to share control of Specie water, banks, or nuggets, even through peaceful trade negotiations.

The lower reaches of the Specie have one other feature of interest: barbfish. Named for the harmless fleshy spurs that droop from the corners of their mouths to aid in feeling along clefts and through mud, Specie barbfish are mud



sharks that spend much of their time scavenging on the bottom. They're slow, lazy, and can grow as long as a horse.

Despite the muck they spend their days in, their flesh tastes delicious raw, fried in fat, or poached in milk and butter. The skin, however, is slimy, brown, rubbery, and stinks of old decay; cut it away and discard it. Barbfish boiled with berries or currants is a meal fit for gods!

## Trade Way

The lifeblood of Amn flows along this broad, freshly cobbled, elevated road. In the open, gently rolling farmlands between Purskul and Imnescar, small three-story watch-towers of open timber can be found along the Way. Each guards a locked, covered well for the use of troops, a stone hut containing firewood for an alarm-beacon, and poles for use with signal flags. The stone keeps safe the signal flags, a war-horn, a heavy tripod-crossbow, and a selection of fire-quarrels for it. Built to provide rallying points against pirate shore raids, rebellion, or orc hordes, they are usually used today just to keep watch for brigands.

Inns and taverns along the road are surprisingly few, because folk seem to just pull off the road wherever the ditch is bridged at a guard-tower and camp in the nearest field. In night-fogs, some idiots even

stop their wagons on the road, with the inevitable results: nasty collisions in the dark. The few inns are surprisingly bad, so I recommend none of them, with but one exception discussed hereafter.

The Trade Way is elevated to shed water and consists of gravel and "fastmud" (cement) between surface and underlay layers of cobblestones. It is wide enough for four wagons to pass abreast with touching wheels if the drovers are careful.

Deep but not steep-sided drainage ditches flank the road, so brigands or "vagabond riders" (travelers who leap aboard moving wagons for a free ride or to hide from pursuit) usually lie hidden amid the ditch-weeds. Hence the Amnian expression of disgust at cowardice: "He's about as bold as ditchweed." Lone travelers afoot, or a pair with a pack beast, are most endangered by such rogues of the road, which is why walking with a caravan is a popular choice for such wayfarers. Think you've no need of such protection? Well, crossbows are easily obtained in Amn, for brigands and everyone else. And never forget that there's a good reason that Amnian farces usually include an actor bedecked with a skull and various bones to portray the Bold Hero.

My survey of Amnian features in this guidebook goes no farther east than the Trade Way, except in mountainous or forest regions.



The midpoint of the journey between Purskul and Imnescar is marked by an inn that bears discussion in any guide to the area—for its usefulness as a rendezvous if for nothing else.

## Places of Interest on Trade Way

### Inn

#### The Battlescarred Bard



Known for its noise, vermin, crowding, and its leak-roofed, ramshackle condition, the Battlescar survives for two reasons.

First, it has a good stable, with alert hostlers under Stablemaster Irvyth Dluburr, one of the most wrinkled gnomes I've ever seen. The hostlers both guard stabled stock against theft, and can ably treat most equine and bovine ailments.

Second, it has an even better kitchen. Dining conditions are only a small step above troughs in a pig barn, with brawls and hurled food common, but the provender served forth is superior. Take it outside, as many do, and try to ignore the buzzing flies. There are dozens of stump-seats around the paddocks where the inn staff have cut back a stand of thorn trees to rob horse-thieves of crucial cover.

The signboard of this inn consists of a lifelike wooden figure hung upside down from its right

ankle; in elder days when a murderer worked in the inn kitchens, a real corpse often replaced this effigy. The figure depicts a male human bard, lute held in one outstretched hand and the other clasped to his breast. His mouth is agape as if singing, and a huge mock axe is buried in the crown of his head. The effigy hangs from a sixty-foot pole to keep it from being stolen often and is surrounded by a ring of lanterns, lit from dusk to dawn.

The innkeeper, a genial and balding giant by the name of Halden Bellovar, wishes it known that bards and minstrels are quite welcome in his house, so long as they don't try to perform. I'd not defy him in this; his arms are thicker than both of my thighs put together. I saw him break up a brawl by calmly plucking two large and furiously-punching warriors up into the air like two feathers, braining them several times against the ceiling until they were unconscious, and then tossing them casually into a corner. I promptly went over to the heap and could barely lift one hairy arm out of the sweaty, bleeding tangle. Not a man to be brawling with, if you catch my drift.

So what of this food I praise so highly? Well, there's little of formal dining or exotic gold-platter dishes to be had anywhere along the Trade Way. But there is a lot of grease and





burnt or overly salty fare served forth.

"Never such at the Battlescar," as the serving wenches say tartly. Though they all wear aprons and dresses, some are men, usually grizzled veteran warriors no longer able to run or tolerate a saddle all day. According to Bellovar, their presence "keeps rowdiness from getting out of hand with the pretty ones."

The weary traveler can expect to dine on the likes of plate-of-gold, warriors' heads, glazed hams and haunches (venison, calf, or mutton), and chopforest. Then you can wash it all down with generous tankards of anonymous but good ale, wine, zzar, or sherry.

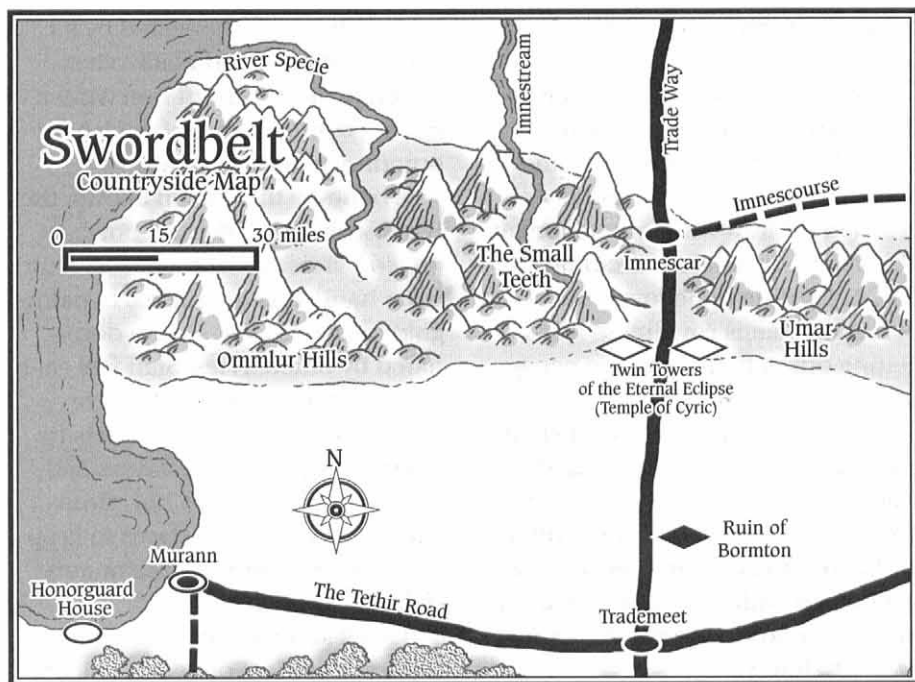
Strangers to Amn should know that plate-of-gold consists of sliced vegetables fried in a highly-salty golden batter, sometimes flavored with fish, and then doused in a golden sauce, usually a honey syrup, sometimes laced with lemon. Warriors' heads are a bowl of baked heads of garlic, bobbing in olive oil surrounded by a moat of twelve different sorts of pickles, some of them sweet-hot, some more salty than anything else, with the occasional pitted date thrown in to stir the mix. The dish is an inducement to slake the throat often and enthusiastically. Chopforest is a mixed green salad, heavy on the sprouts

and cabbages, but rescued by its garnish of basil and black olives, which delight without overwhelming the subtle flavors of wildshoot onions and mallowfern.

Whenever the season allows, the Battlescar serves dessert bowls of mixed berries and downcoast fruit, from handsuns (mangoes) to palm-gold (peaches), but always dominated by blueberries. Staff feel each fruit carefully to avoid mush or stony underripes. The intent is to deliver a dish of what slavers call "moist and tender." In hot climes, such food is given to slaves to keep them as free from disease or sun-sickness as possible.

That's summer fare; in winter, expect to see lots of dried apricots and butter-slaked rice, accompanied by bacon and onion blackfry platters and hot hand-loaves of bread. Patrons of the Battlescar know their stomachs will be well served.

Travelers who hit upon the bright idea of dining in the Battlescar and then camping nearby are warned that local landowners allow bulls on one side of the road and wild boars on the other. Some even suspect the boar-owner of having a captive, hidden deepspawn that spews out these dangerous beasts to roam their lands, for the supply seems endless. The fences are there for a reason.



# The Swordbelt

**I** regret to inform readers that current and violent events in this region made it impossible for me to properly explore it and give any guidance as to its features and character. The Swordbelt consists of the mountains known as the Small Teeth and the land between them and the Wealdath—that is, the coastal lands dominated by Murann, about as far inland as Brost.

Included in the Swordbelt is the settlement of Imnescar in Imnes-

vale, though some locals have told me a hidden valley exists which is more properly called Imnesvale. The Swordbelt also includes Trademeet and Murann, the dramatic temple known as the Twin Towers of the Eternal Eclipse, and the haunted ruins of Bormton. The former Alibakkar Estates lie within the Swordbelt, as do the perilous Ommur Hills (west of the Trade Way) and Umar Hills (east of it). The Imnescourse is a notable path through the latter, though it's never been a safe route.



Traditional impediments to travel in the Swordbelt, and the reason for its name, are the monsters that infest the area, retreating to the mountains whenever concerted attempts are made to root them out. Wolves, bugbears, trolls, and worse things have always featured in Swordbelt lore and deathcounts. In Murann, Trademeet, and even Athkatla, "everybody knows" that travelers in the hills hereabouts should wear bells to discourage the wolves from approaching, because of old, the large archer bands of wolf-hunters wore such bells. But I must warn you that Swordbelt locals identify monster spoor by looking for dung laced with bells.

The reason for my inability to tour the Swordbelt is a danger menacing any traveler in this area: an army of monsters. I do not lie, nor embellish.<sup>9</sup> A monster army has laid siege to Murann, the Sailors' City. I've heard of thousands of gathered orcs, trolls, bugbears, goblins, and worse—even beholders! By some miracle of controlling magic or authoritarian monstrous brutality, they largely avoid turning to rend each other, and remain encamped, raiding the Swordbelt

for food—largely in the form of humans!

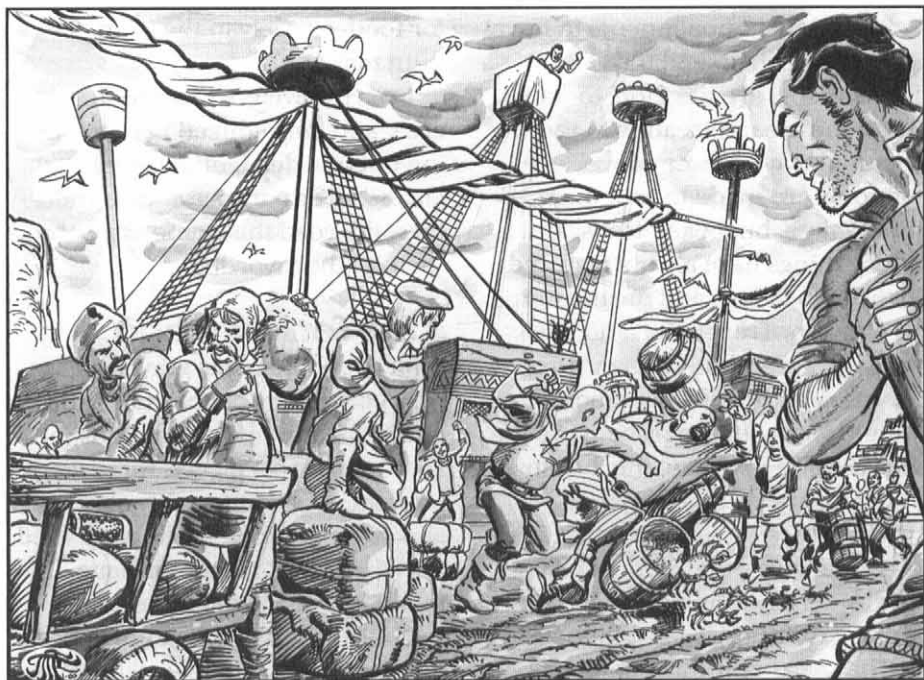
I warn travelers to avoid this area, and am reduced here to offering but one detail of the Swordbelt, gleaned from my previous wanderings: the road that some say is the "belt" of the Swordbelt.

## The Tethir Road

Built of cobbles over gravel, a base now covered by clutch-moss, this is one of the best overland roads in Faerûn. In most places, three wagons can pass comfortably abreast, and stone-shaping spells were used to create cross-ridges for better footing on all steep grades.

The road was built at the behest of King Dalagar "Longwalker" of the long-lost Shining Plains realm of Andlath. From 230-239 DR, Andlath's forces built the road from Athkatla to Ormath in an attempt to unite the South by trade and expand his kingdom. The road has outlasted Andlath by a thousand years, enriching Amn anew every year. It still stretches from Murann to Lheshayl on the Shining Plains, and thence to Alaghôn, in Turmish, on the Sea of Fallen Stars.

<sup>9</sup> *Elminster*: Let me echo this—no, he doth not embellish, for once.



# The Nelanther

**N**early all civilized folk of Faerûn have heard of the fabled Nelanther, that labyrinth of sea-rocks and islands

infested with bold, black-hearted pirates who imperil Sword Coast shipping from year to year, defying the efforts of even the mightiest magically aided navies to dislodge or exterminate them. Every ruler, courtier, and sage has his own view of who the pirates are, what they want, and their strengths.

More than a few have come to

believe the elves of mysterious Evermeet aid and support them as an ongoing shield. The pirates may guard against fleets of curious or greedy humans that might otherwise whelm and sail to explore the island realm of the elves in numbers so great that even the legendary ships that sail its skies could not hold them all back.

I am no pirate, nor would I last long among them. Therefore your scribe can say little of the infamous port of Skaug, or Ioma, whom some believe is a pirate kingdom with its



own throne and royal house and rich towns. I can, however, recount what I have learned, heard, and seen about features of the Nelanther that concern folk of Amn and Tethyr, and those who sail along those shores. The traveler should be aware that the information that follows is incomplete and possibly incorrect in one or two slight respects. Yet it may still serve them, so long as they neither desire to be pirates, nor to hunt such wolves of the sea on their own home ground.

I know of no true chart of the Nelanther to be bought, even for a ship's weight in gold, anywhere in Faerûn. Even upon the altars of Selûne, Umberlee, and Shaundakul, I would wager, none such exist.

## **Arlathan**

Few Amnians know of this island, but those who do speak of it with fear and disagree from one to another whether it is part of the Nelanther or not. "That prison offshore" is how some merchants spoke of it, and one of them told me more of its origins—origins that authorities in both Amn and Tethyr seem to want kept secret.

Your humble scribe considers it his duty to hunt down secrets of Faerûn and lay them before you, so I undertook a long, difficult, and dangerous investigation.

I can now say that this island was apparently once a land of gnomes, who were slain or driven away by

elves, who in turn were slain by "things that came out of the water." It then lay uninhabited for centuries and eventually became known as Grimgates, after a pirate who laired there.

The island stands close enough to shore to be worth scouring from time to time to prevent pirates from using it as an easy base for regular night-raiding ashore. By the same token, the pirates dared not let Amnian and Tethyrian naval vessels fortify it, so they gathered to sweep down viciously on all attempts to do so. This led to the island being abandoned by both sides until someone built a keep beside the best, shoreward, anchorage on Grimgates. The builder is thought to be a mage employing magically coerced or animated servitors, for who else could have raised something so swiftly, without being noticed?

Something befell whoever built the keep. Once complete, it stood empty for a season or more, whereupon slavers outlawed in Athkatla and Murann thought of seizing it as their own base. One of them may have been called Arlathan, or else named the stronghold Arlathan Keep for his own reasons.

It took some time for Amn and Tethyr to become aware of this, as the slavers were careful to prey on passing ships. They used Arlathan as a prison for the captives they'd seized until they could covertly



arrange ransoms ashore or sell their walking goods to Calishite satraps.

Preying on passing ships is pirate work, and it wasn't long before certain local pirates spread word ashore of the "dangerous slavers" waiting to "seize all of the noble and mighty" in Amn and Tethyr. Amnian vessels promptly stormed Arlathan, slaying the slavers to a man. They may have had pirate aid, as certain pirates mysteriously acquired large and fast new ships at this time.

The pirates, it seems, have promised not to storm Arlathan in return for not ever being incarcerated there. Instead, the authorities have used it to house slavers, thieves and swindlers, the worst criminals in profit-minded Amn.

In later years, rebels and others deemed too dangerous to shackle on their own ground were sent here. More than a few folk in both Amn and Tethyr whisper that it may now house prisoners whom the powerful in both lands desire to make disappear for a time.

The few records that mention Arlathan now refer to it as "the Reformatory for the Magically Afflicted." At least one mage I spoke with remarked bitterly that the name should more properly be "Prison for all afflicted with magic who do not grovel before the Council, but who may be too useful to be destroyed out of hand."

Whatever the truth about this

mysterious island, the traveler should be aware that even speaking of Arlathan, by any of its names, can be dangerous. Travel to or near it is difficult, for though the keep still sees some sort of service as a prison, pirates seem to freely use Arlathan as a port. Let the wayfarer beware.

## **Asavir's Channel**

Asavir was a pirate captain who will live forever in legend. He achieved the greatest pirate victory yet seen on the Sword Coast. In the Year of the Howling Axe (1021 DR), Asavir captured the entire season's trade goods of twelve Amnian merchant houses heading south to Calimshan, seizing more than a hundred cargo ships. It is said that men counted the ships completing a voyage between the Sword Coast North and the Shining Sea on one hand that year.

Pirates flocked to sail with Asavir, and he swiftly rose to command a fleet of over a dozen reaving vessels—a fleet that was lost, pirate lord and all, in a storm west of the Nelanther a few years later.

Asavir's Channel is today among the busiest waterways in Faerûn. Pirates and merchants alike use its calm waters to skirt the Sword Coast and avoid longer, dangerous voyages through the rock- and storm-rich waters of the Nelanther. Pirate attacks are to be expected along this stretch, though the diligence of





Tethyr's navy is making them less frequent. "Black fleets" of three or more pirate ships sailing together are rare indeed in recent seasons.

## The Race

This stretch of water off the coast of Tethyr gains its name from the constant, strong winds that blow onshore here, and the speed they grant to ships running east. Such swiftness is often needed by captains straining to outrun the many pirates who lurk in these waters. Ships bound south along the Sword Coast usually pass through Asavir's Channel and the Race despite the pirates of the Nelanther. A wide run around the pirate-infested waters brings its own dangers from marine monsters, storms, and unpredictable winds that can sweep vessels days off course, render them lost, or keep them becalmed to near-starvation.

Only true masters of their vessels can be successful pirates in these waters, for the winds make it impossible for unskilled crews to maneuver well enough to catch and board another ship. Pirates prone to bragging often tell tales of their daring victories on the Race.

## Hook Isle

Little known outside pirate ports, this hook-shaped island guards the Race, lying almost due south of the southernmost headland of the Dragon's Head.

Hook Isle is said to be rocky, heavily wooded, and uninhabited. The island itself takes the shape of a crescent with both arms pointing north, with the Bay of Skulls sheltered between. A deadly cluster of shoal rocks guards the mouth of its lone bay from the worst fury of storms sweeping in from the sea. A low, hull-ripping reef across the mouth of this bay makes it a less than ideal anchorage; a backwater seizes hold of flotsam and never gives it back to the wider waves. The bay is a holy place to some sahuagin, and parties of both warriors and shamans will attack any ship or creature venturing inside the reef.

The Bay of Skulls is said to hold among its wrack the fabled Wyrmskull Throne, a legend often retold along the Sword Coast by pirate agents seeking to lure rich, careless treasure-seekers (such as the bored nobility of Waterdeep and Calimshan) into their reach. More than seven expeditions and a dozen independent ships have tried to find the Throne—and none have yet returned.

A pirate source told me that pirate ships patrolling the waters between the Tusks and Hook Isle seize or sink more than half of the vessels who slacken in the frantic rush through the Race, instead turning south to seek treasure. Other ships fall victim to the rocks and the sahuagin, but a few have



managed to reach the Bay of Skulls. Of their fate, he was unsure.

Many rumors have arisen about the Wyrmskull Throne in this last decade, since word of its finding first spread. The Wyrmskull Throne of Shanatar, lost since the fall of the ancient dwarven realm of Shanatar, is said to have been made of polished obsidian, its feet fashioned from the impaled skulls of four great elder blue wyrms, their horns still intact. Many magical powers flicker about the Throne, eager to be awakened. Among them is the ability to *teleport* beings who know how to command it to various set locales that were once important to the governing of Shanatar.

The best tales of its finding can be matched and queried to arrive at the following summary. The Throne was discovered by pirates in the Year of the Turret (1360 DR), and this secret got out when a pirate was saved from drowning and captured by sailors loyal to Lord Hhune of Zazesspur. Under vigorous questioning, the veteran sea-reaver, one Havilos Thrunn, told Lord Hhune of a forested, horseshoe-shaped island near Nemessor whose open end faced Tulumene.

The lagoon between the arms of the isle, Thrunn claimed, is filled with broken prows, masts, and rigging—a tangle of many shattered planks, barrels, and seachests so thick that in many places a man can

clamber among it dryshod, as if on an island. Strong currents swirl in the cove, keeping the wreckage in slight but constant motion. The shallows gleam and sparkle with the tumblings of thousands of drifting, water-stirred coins and jewels.

At the center of the lagoon between the arms of the isle, a black, arch-backed throne with four huge skulls as feet can be seen underwater. The throne floats at mid-depth—about 85 feet underwater, Thrunn judged—but does not move, despite the water and debris surging around it. Seated on it is a human skeleton clad in still-bright robes, intact and sitting upright, as if held there by magic.

Havilos Thrunn offered to trade the secrets of navigating the rocks and shoals safely to landfall in the Bay of Skulls for his life. Instead, Thrunn was jailed while mages were sent for with skills in spell-prying at thoughts, to reveal any pirate traps and treacheries Thrunn may have neglected to mention. But the pirate mysteriously disappeared during his first night of incarceration, leaving his cell still locked—and soaked with seawater.

## **The Raking Rocks**

This is the name given to the thousands of shoals and tiny rocky islets that lie to the south of the Nelanther Isles in a great shieldlike arc. Though every pirate knows secret



channels through these ship-rending teeth, most give the Rocks a wide berth whenever possible. An intrepid few eke out a living as wreckers, setting beacons to lure ships captained by the ignorant to wreck on the rocks by night. Others know better than to steer to any light within days of these waters.

Saner pirates dart through the fringes of the Raking Rocks when pursued by Tethyrian navy vessels or other foes, hoping to lure their pursuers onto reefs or jutting rocks. In certain seas, the teethlike rocks cause wakes of foam and spray, forming parallel white scars across the waters.

Pirates traditionally have hidden their greatest treasures amid the Rocks, and of course not a few of them have never returned to reclaim their wealth. Pirate legend insists that the hoards hidden hereabouts contain a lot of magic, not just coins and gems. It is demonstrably true that something hereabouts causes *detect magic* spells to fail and twists both scrying and *teleport* magics awry to unintended destinations.

## The Tusks

This pair of islets is among the largest dangers along this part of

the Sword Coast. Wild sheep from long-ago shipwrecks roam the Tusks, and a wild variety of shapeshifters are said to call the island home.

The Tusks mark where Firedrake Bay ends and the Race begins. Only veteran captains confidently sail between the islands, for the Gullet (the strait between the Tusks) is studded with jutting rocks. The passage is particularly deadly when a vessel is running before a storm or under full sail, unless its helmsman knows exactly where the rocks are.

Once a rich copper mine could be found on Borammur, the northernmost of the Tusks, but some "dark things of the depths" slaughtered both miners and the villagers above them. After two halfhearted attempts to resettle the islands led to similar butcherings, the Tusks were abandoned. The mineshafts and granary caves can still be seen on Borammur's northern shore.

Ships that have lost their masts while scudding on the Race sometimes anchor off the southern island, Iyritrastrul, to cut replacement masts, as tall stands of shadowtop, duskwood, and blueleaf almost entirely cloak the southernmost of the Tusks.



# The Dragon's Head



he hands of the farmer and the stonemason lie but lightly on this never-quite-tamed peninsula,

where elves and monsters still roam thick forests, crowding is unknown, and natural beauty always near at hand. Stags are hunted enthusiastically here by the wealthy of Amn and Tethyr in search of sport, and the forest

bounty remains rich. But there is little here to interest the busy merchant beyond plentiful timber to be freely cut, for roads are bad or absent—and so are buyers.

However, many folk travel for other reasons and may well venture into the near-wilds of this largely unspoiled region. It is for them that notable local features are herein treated. The wayfarer should be aware that there is no



law in much of the peninsula save what one's own ready blade or bow can buy. Pirates and brigands frequent its wilderness, and all manner of cultists, slavers, merchant cabals, and other dangerous groups gather in the glades, dells, and ruins here.

The wise traveler moves quietly, hides upon the approach of strangers, keeps away from fires seen at night unless desperate. Neither does he proclaim laws better suited to the busy streets of Athkatla. Those desiring to see the Dragon's Head from within the relative safety of well-armed, guided numbers are directed to the concerns in Murann who lead hunts onto the peninsula in summer and fall. The wayfarer can expect to find plentiful wild forage and fresh water, as this is a land of countless little brooks. But as always, 'tis best to ensure that one is yet the hunter and has not become the hunted.

## **Acoval's Cove**

This tiny anchorage lies east of Velen at the foot of the Horn Cliffs beneath Tordraken, the ducal castle. Reduced to little more than a sea cave at high tide, the cove is named for a young chief of the long-extinct Clan Garloth. Acoval was washed up in the cove after his boat sank at sea, and found himself lying on a heap of hundreds of pearl-laden oysters. For centuries afterward, the Blackthorn family

have farmed pools of pearl oysters in the cove.

Storm wrack is often hurled up here, but scavengers are unwelcome, as evidenced by guards with trained wardogs and ready crossbows.

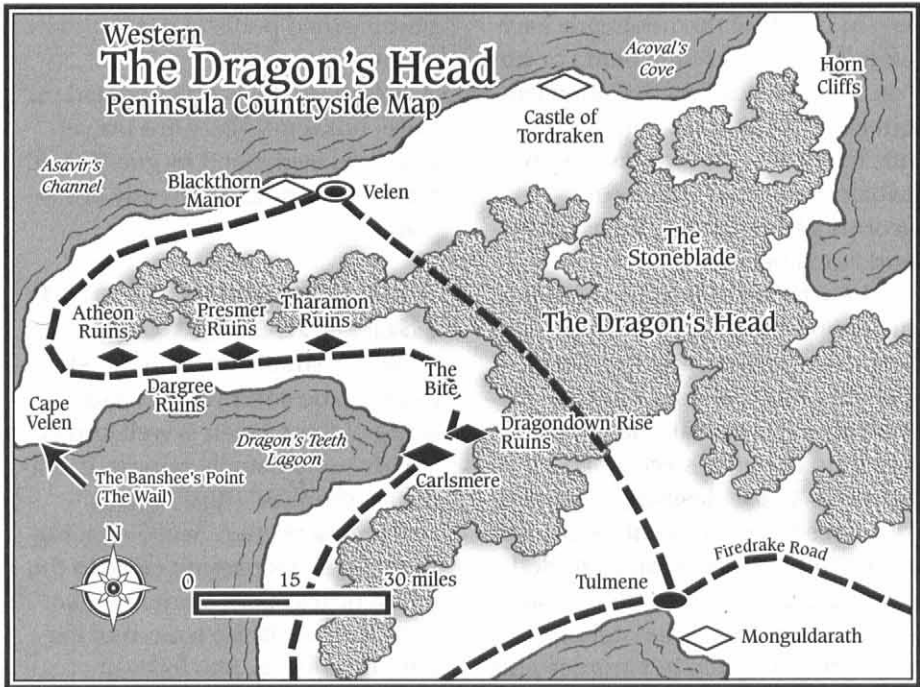
## **The Banshee's Point (Banshee's Wail)**

A certain small, desolate forest glade at the southwesternmost point of Cape Velen is well known to sailors, who usually refer to it simply as "the Wail". Wailing and screaming is often heard echoing there by ships passing close to the shore or travelers along the Bite.

A banshee is the source of the chilling sounds. She forever mourns her lost children, who were among the first elves slaughtered by humans in these lands. There are persistent legends of pirates burying treasure close enough to the glade that no one will dare to come looking for it.

## **The Bite**

Despite the pirates of the Nelanther, the swiftest, safest route between Velen and Tulmene remains the sea. To daring dryshod wayfarers, "walking the Bite" means taking the trail that winds along the coastal cliffs of the outer Dragon's Head Peninsula, through the haunted, abandoned villas and estates of the Dragon's Teeth, and through deep forest to avoid the Banshee's Point. It's a



winding, often precipitous and slippery road, whipped with winds that have been known to snatch laden wagons off the cliffs into the sea, and plagued with prowling monsters and brigands. But for some, this route is preferable to seasickness. Many wayside bramble patches hereabouts yield berries, but beware thorns as long and sharp as daggers. Travelers are advised to bring sufficient provender to avoid hunting, sleep only under guard, and tarry not. Those who come to hunt tend to be hunted.

### **Blackthorn Manor**

The old fortified keep of the Blackthorn family stands just west of

Velen. Age, severe winter storms, and the reduced fortunes of the Blackthorns over the past century have left it crumbling, but Duchess-Consort Lawantha Blackthorn is now slowly restoring the manor to grandeur. Lawantha uses it as a secondary home from Tordraken when the duke is away at court in Faerntarn. Expect grudging hospitality if she's not in residence, but a warmer welcome if she is—though adventurers and anyone else who arouses her suspicions may be magically examined. Within the manor walls is an old chapel to Mystra that serves Lawantha as her personal magical sanctuary. The chapel is not open to guests unless





their devotion to the Lady of Mysteries is demonstrably strong. Fine stonework abounds, with particularly fine gate-flanking gargoyles—sculpted, not enchanted creatures, I was assured.

The city of Velen maintains a cliff-front battery of ballistae and catapults here against pirates, and its guardsmen will defend the manor if called upon.

## **Carlsmere**

Among the many abandoned and overgrown estates of the Dragon's Teeth Lagoon is the onetime favorite manor and summer abode of the royal house of Tethyr. Its four-spired gatehouse stands beside the Bite, one massive arched gate lying in the road and the other hanging by one still-massive hinge, creaking in the wind. A failing guard-spell keeps the shape of a sentinel in full armor standing silently where the gates no longer bar the way, but his booted feet fade before they reach the ground. He responds to nothing, save to reflect back all spells cast at him, as several curious mages have learned to their cost.

This magical remnant has led many travelers and brigands alike to think Carlsmere may yet hold something of value beyond a few overgrown apple trees and a herb garden whose bushes have become tangled trees. While this seems more likely than at some other sites

around the Lagoon, thus far no one has found anything of value here. At least, nothing has been found that anyone has been unwise enough to talk about.

Beyond the gate, a tree-cloaked ridge conceals the main manor house: a low, massive structure with four squat corner towers and a precarious slate roof. Brigands and monsters often use as lairs the stables and outlying buildings, which include a collapsed coach shed, servants' cottages, and a children's nursery and playhouse that's larger and grander than most homes in Tulmene. None tarry long, thanks to the ghosts.

During a storm one night more than two centuries ago, Prince Valys smothered his older brother Priam and his brother's children, Rising Prince Vyshan and Rising Princess Majal, in their sleep, seeking to ensure that he would inherit great-grandfather Alemander's throne. The traitor was in turn slain by his younger brother Coram, a ranger who used his skills to track the murderer to where he stood. Coram then challenged Valys on the spot. Their duel was furious and bloody, and when it was done, the wounded future Coram III of Tethyr grimly burned the dismembered body of Valys in the courtyard and ordered the house abandoned.

Over the years many exploring the ruins have heard and seen the



weeping and confused children wandering the halls of the playhouse and the manor, seeking comfort and warmth that can never be theirs. The shade of Prince Priam rages about the upper floors of the manor as a poltergeist, angry at the deaths of his children and his inability to gain vengeance on his second brother. It's said that those who sleep in the wrong rooms of Carlsmere never awaken and are found to have been smothered.

## **Dragon's Teeth Lagoon**

At the western end of the Velen peninsula, the jaws of the "dragon's head" part to frame a peaceful inlet that gains its incongruous name from how it looks on maps and from the air, not from any draconic infestation. Along its shores are forty once-lavish homes, abandoned by their noble owners in the wake of the Ten Black Days. Some of them were gutted by fires or mobs who came howling to slaughter, loot, and burn. Their work has ensured that no easily found treasures still lie here, though as fierce winter weather causes shattered walls, floors, and ceilings to fall, increasing numbers of hidden rooms and hoards are being laid bare. The would-be scavenger is warned that restless spirits haunt many of the ruins, and brigands seem always to lurk in the vicinity.

The most famous of the haunted villas of Dragon's Teeth is the Manor Atheon. There, a madness came upon Lord Sarnil Atheon after five days of thick sea fog that caused him to hew down his family with the huge sword of his ancestors. Whenever fog encloaks the manor, the lord's mad cries echo again—and the phantoms of his wife and children race along its halls trying to escape his sword, bleeding profusely on the stones and screaming silently as an unseen blade hacks at them.

Other villas here whose ruins remain habitable include the Manor Dargree, the Manor Tharamon, and the Manor Presmer. Many brigand bands have used these as bases for short periods, but none have remained long. There are many legends of treasure left behind here, the most popular being the dowry of lost Lady Sharanree Korun, who vanished before her wedding night, centuries ago. She's thought to have hidden her jewels in a pit somewhere in the woods where she played as a child.

The most credible tale is that of the loot-cache of the brigand "Black" Sarnjack Hlaever, who was slain on the Lagoon road with all his men by an intended victim who proved too ready for war. No one has ever found his magically concealed store of wealth, from which he paid his men handsomely.



The royal estates of Carlsmere and the commonly held nobles' hunting lodge and forest of Down-dragon Rise lie behind the coastal villas, reached down their own overgrown but gated lanes. Certain of the villas are heavily guarded and still in use, presumably by their rightful owners.

The traveler who sees a ship standing at anchor just offshore can expect to find guards in evidence, and they don't welcome wayfarers on the road doing anything other than rushing past under their watchful escort. Those who tarry or ask questions will be warned by a display of weapons and attacked if they linger. I've seen three ships in the Lagoon in all my travels, and if my eyes have learned anything on my forays across Faerûn, I'd say that they were all pirate vessels.

## **Honorguard House**

This fortified manorial keep stands on the northern shore of the Velen Peninsula in County Fyraven, southwest of Murann. Decorated with splendid stone relief carvings of knights battling wyverns, hydrae, and gigantic serpents, it towers above the shore-meadows atop a spur of rock, surrounded by vineyards and lush grazing pastures.

Honorguard is the seat of the heraldic office of Gauntlet, currently held by Tallar Goldhelm, a half-elven ranger. Gauntlet

responded to a summons from the new Court of Tethyr and presented himself at Faerntarn. Until replaced at the next Shieldmeet, he'll act in concert with the Sheriff's Chancellor Count Jordy Gallum and others to help charter and regulate adventurers in Tethyr officially hired to hunt monsters in the eastern Highlands and the Forest of Mir.

This fortified hold is also a haven for Harpers, from lowly road-minstrels to adventurers of power, and I'm told a half-dozen or more can be found here. A dozen or so small farms huddle about the keep, and though this stretch of shore lacks an inn, a traveler can cheaply find warm, rustic beds and hearty fare at any of the farmsteads. The chate-laine at Honorguard, Craethra Shardinest, happily furnishes names and directs travelers to the right doorsteps. Honorguard itself usually welcomes only Heralds and those in their company.

## **The Horn Cliffs**

These high cliffs run for miles along the northeastern shores of County Firedrake. They're so named for the many jagged pinnacles of rock that jut like beasts' horns from the surf at the base of the cliffs and from many points along the cliff faces. These spikes make ideal roosts for birds of all sorts and aid climbers, but the forbidding height of the cliffs has effectively prohibited shore settlements.



The origin of these rocky horns is unknown, but brigands, down-on-their-luck mercenaries, adventurers, and even failed Amnian merchants roam among the horns constantly, searching the many caves for hoards of merchant gold reputed to have been hidden here. Would-be searchers are warned that many monsters are known to lurk along the Horn Shore, preying on the very intruders attracted here by hopes of wealth.

Within the last decade, there have been at least two major treasure recoveries: the Purple Keys spellbooks, thought to have been stolen from a Magist Guildmaster in Waterdeep some years ago; and Seven Dancers, gold statuettes of the goddess Sune, richly studded with rubies, opals, and sapphires. At least one royal treasury of Tethyr is thought to lie hidden somewhere along the Horn Shore.

The city of Velen maintains another cliff-front battery of ballistae and catapults at a particularly prominent cape known as the Prow, which is alertly guarded by soldiers of Velen's city guard.

## **Jhaansciim**

This tiny, curiously named fishing village on the southern shore of the Dragon's Head Peninsula lies about a mile west and south of Khalid's Wall. It's noteworthy for only two things: food, and a ghost that endangers long-term inhabitants.

Jhaansciim has a lone, tiny inn, The Wallside. It's a forgettable place, but for its food and pleasant view. There a family headed by "Mother" Illuse Nantennebra prepares spicy fish stews that draw every mouth in the village, and many travelers from farther afield.

Nantennebra stews are thick, oily, and clothes-staining brown. They frankly look as if something disgusting died in them long ago, like the murky waters of many swamp shallows. But the taste is always exquisite, hot or cold. Mother Nantennebra will sell a pot of this wonderful stuff to anyone who brings his or her own pot, but she refuses to make or sell in any greater bulk. She also declines any offer to share her recipe or move to richer settings. Far grander merchants than I have tried to talk or bribe her.

She may yet, however, run short of local mouths to feed, for the Crimson Tread haunts Jhaansciim, and word of its bloody career is spreading along the shores of Amn. Villagers become utterly terrified when they begin to leave bloody footprints—and lack any wounds to cause such marks. This foretells their coming doom at the ghostly hands of the Crimson Tread. Even a few visitors have so died, it's not yet known if fleeing the area can keep one alive. All that is certain is that once a person walking paths in or near the village leaves bloody



footprints, that person will be dead within a tenday.

Locals talk of Hathem Gedlaera, an angry young village boy who was much abused by bullying older boys of Jhaansciim. Eventually he left for Athkatla, swearing he'd join the assassins of the Shadow Thieves and someday get even with his tormentors. Hathem died a failure; one of his severed feet was found in a Mosstone alley five years ago. Ever since, Jhaansciim folk have died in many odd and suspicious ways after their feet began to leave behind the Crimson Tread.

## **Khalid's Wall**

For more than 1,750 years the unfinished remnants of a mad Calishite pasha's dream have crossed the neck of the Dragon's Head Peninsula just south of Murann. Hardy foresters can easily walk the length of the overgrown, crumbling Wall in a day. But keen eyes are often needed to even identify the heavily worn foundations under thick forest undergrowth. Most folk who see part of the Wall believe the huge blocks of stone to be bedrock jutting up through the soil and worn smooth by sea winds.

The largest ruins of Khalid's Wall are the stumps of two guard towers at the southern edge of the forest not far north of the Firedrake Road. Nothing marks the end of the Wall from the road, so many travel past

it unwittingly. Only those who follow the intermittent line of stones south from Murann can easily find the towers. The towers were perhaps sixty feet square at their bases, and their thick walls sloped inward as they rose three levels to rooftop battlements. They have long since been stripped of anything useful, though both retain deep wells of drinkable water.

The years have not been kind to Khalid's dream, and although many wayfarers have used the towers as shelters for a night, only the lower levels of each offer shelter from wind and rain. The upper floors are open to the elements, and the battlements have toppled into the forest in many places, leaving hole-studded floors on once massive but now rotted beams unsafe for anything heavier than a halfling. The lowest floors, each equipped with a bake-oven and two pantry-cellar, have ceilings of massive stone slabs that should withstand the fall of the entire upper works onto them, when that inevitable collapse occurs.

Travelers should be aware that local brigands know the towers well, and that they afford enough cover to attract beasts to try them as lairs.

## **Monguldarath**

This modest stone keep stands on the crest of a ridge some five miles east of Tulmene, amid groves of



duskwood that are swiftly reclaiming its outlying farms. The personal stronghold of many Counts of Fyraven over the years, Monguldarath was recently given to the newly created Count of Fyraven, Tanar Keelson. The servants tell me that Keelson, who also serves as Seas' Admiral of Tethyr, is not at home as much as he'd like to be. So the remodeling of the keep goes slowly.

Small and peaceable bands of travelers will still find a night's welcome here in a guesthouse with attached stable and paddock. Longer stays, and displays of formidable magic or weaponry, will earn cooler receptions and the eventual summoning by signal-horn from the battlements of a dozen mounted men-at-arms from Tulmene. Monguldarath itself has a garrison of ten armsmen and another six or seven servants who have some experience of battle.

The tales of this keep being haunted are true, but the phantoms bother Keelson not at all, and the servants have grown used to them. These hauntings, results of the violence that followed the Ten Black Days, usually take the form of silently gliding apparitions of armed men. Some scream soundlessly as they stagger under the butchery of unseen blades, or rush about headless.

All in all, Monguldarath is a safe stop to those who behave themselves,

but it offers nothing more of interest to the wayfarer. If Keelson's power and influence wax steadily but not too swiftly, the sleepy farms around Monguldarath could be knit together by a vigorous new settlement.

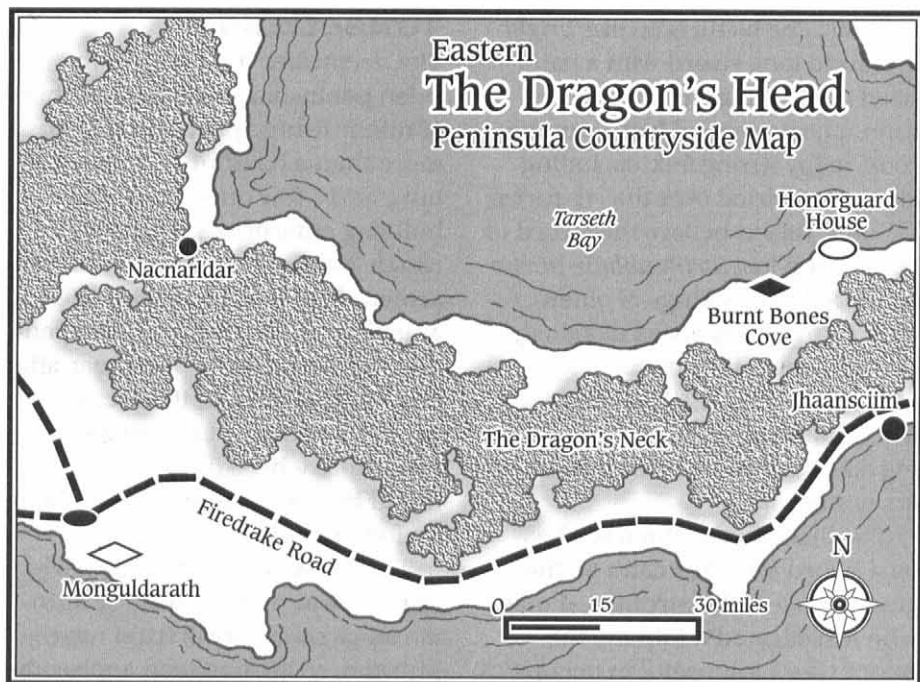
## **Nacnarldar**

I'm told by a source of irreproachable truth that a small elven settlement survives deep in the heart of the peninsula forest, though few humans have seen hints of elven habitation hereabouts since the time of the twelve clans of Old Tethyr. These elves, the Tribe Nacnar, lurk apart from men except when they judge foresters to penetrate too deeply into their dim domain. Then their arrows fly swift and true.

More introverted and elusive than even the Suldusk, the Nacnar probably number no more than a hundred fifty in all. Nacnarldar, a dell with a tiny lake at its heart that is almost entirely overhung with trees, is their central meeting place and largest settlement.

By keeping themselves hidden and scattered, they have escaped attention for centuries, though they've emerged at least once to make fleeting—and failed—contact with Velaen traders. They were then seeking certain living herbs and small exotic substances that veteran traders judged to be "needed for casting spells, and naught else."





## The Old Velmene Road

This way of cleared gravel and stones runs almost arrow-straight between Velen and Tulumene. Its making must have required great effort, as the road cleaves through banks and thick stands of trees rather than seeking the easiest way around. Deeply cut below the surrounding forest banks in many places, its route remains clear despite an enthusiastic overgrowth of trees. The Old Velmene Road has lain unmaintained and unpatrolled for centuries, ever since the Killing Wave wiped out Velen's troops, its protectors.

It is now used only by careless or desperate folk in a hurry—and

such are perfect prey for gnolls that dwell somewhere near the center of the ruined Run. The tribe is named "Harrur," though my informant cautions he may have grievously misheard the name, as he was sprinting away through the forest for his life at the time.

Anyone in Velen and Tulumene who travels the road and survives intact deserves to brag about it. Judging by local tavern tales, most of them do just that.

## The Stoneblade

Somewhere in the northern promontory forest east of Velen is a great oak glade. At its heart stands a sword embedded deep in a cleft



boulder. The blade is an *everbright* oversized long sword with a palm-sized ruby gem as its pommel. It cannot be wrenched free from the rock; many strong folk, including giants, have tried over the centuries.

Some Velaen believe the sword to be the long-lost *Strohblade* borne by the legendary kings of olden-days Tethyr. They speak glowingly of it whenever they travel to Murann and other places away from the Head, to draw free-spending adventurers and curiosity seekers out to Velen.

The blade in the stone is a bastard sword and thus can't be the great sword of the Strohms. A mage who investigated it told me the sword was a jest useful in occupying the time of "the brutish clodwitted swordswingers who swagger over too many lands these days and drag all Faerûn down to the bloodshed that is all they are accomplished at." It is an ancient lure created by elves, who ringed the glade with archers.

Any nonelven creature who touches any part of the sword suffers harm as if struck by a single *magic missile* bolt. There is no sword at all, but a spur of rock shaped by the magic to seem to be a tempered steel blade surmounted by a gem. It draws the energies it strikes out with from the very creature it harms. Thus far, no commonly known spell has been found to defend against it.

## Tarseth Bay

The deepwater bay north of the Velen peninsula shelters a number of minor fishing ports, usually no more than a handful of ramshackle huts, and a few one-family ship-building enterprises. These are rough, insular communities of well-armed, suspicious folk who offer no amenities to the traveler. Even peddlers who visit these ports year after year sleep hidden in the rocky heights, expecting to be robbed if they snore where they may be found by the locals, who offer them no food nor shelter.

The Tarseth ports are regularly raided by pirates repelled by Amnian ships sailing forth from nearby Murann, so anyone seen approaching can expect to be greeted with swords and loaded crossbows—in the hands of half a dozen unfriendly, hard-looking men. Fugitives outlawed in Athkatla and Murann are sometimes taken in here if they pay well. But if they seem to know too much about pirates, or if persistent or powerful searchers come looking for them, the locals will quietly kill them without hesitation, so as to be left alone.

There is nothing here to interest the traveler. From west to east, the settlements I found (though the wayfarer will seek them in vain on any map) are named: Noanarr's Hold, Treetrith, Forngal's Fish, Dorth, Vulgath's Draw, and Coppercloak. The last of those was named



after a ship wrecked in its tiny cove (called "something that sounded like Coppercloak"). There was once a mill at the largest and most eastern Tarseth settlement, Larungyr, but pirates slew everyone there and burned the settlement down. It's now a deserted place known, imaginatively enough, as Burnt Bones Cove.

## Tulmene

This once-prosperous fishing town was fortified long ago against pirate attack. But in fact it did a lot of not-so-covert trade with pirate vessels, serving as their primary mainland ship repair facility, until the ascent of Queen Zaranda—who's not all that well liked here. Halflings and humans dwell here, and strangers not known as pirates are regarded with some suspicion as possible—nay, probable—court spies.

Visitors who go about asking questions and looking at everything, as I did, swiftly acquire an ever-present and unsubtle escort that suggests, with increasing bluntness, relocation elsewhere—say, to Port Kir, "that den of craven netcutting dogs." The sailors of Port Kir are even less liked locally than the Queen is. Jeering is the least a Kirran visitor can expect in the streets of Tulmene.

Their attentions prevented your humble scribe from doing his usual thorough delve into matters local. But this much can be said: The

town is dominated by the stink from the eastern docks, where stand the drying sheds and guildhouse of the local Guild of Fishmongers and Fishermen. The Pyllam Shipyards are where most folk in town work, and that steadily. Lurking pirates seem to capture a tenth or more of their vessels while on maiden sailings, so the yards are always busy. Merchants, in addition to wayfarers, buy canned fish at several local canneries (Zarmshield's is the best). A former temple to Umlerlee is now the Wavelord's House, consecrated to Valkur and gaining local popularity; look for a carved and painted dolphin over its front door. Despite Tulmene's industry, it is not a wealthy place.

The town is abuzz with rumors that the court is aware of the hard times in Tulmene and intends to build a brewery, wagonworks, and foundry in the area. Court agents have begun to negotiate for the purchase of lands, but local owners have thus far been insulted by the offers. There is also the rumor that a local garrison, with wharf and patrol cutters, would also come to Tulmene to protect these new businesses.

On a lesser note, someone around town has begun stealing armor—all sorts of armor, from ancient crumbling trophies hung on walls to the battle-steel of passing adventurers. Some Tulumennar blame the thefts on the crown



(court agents gathering metal for their future foundry), but others say pirates are more likely. Or perhaps someone's trying to equip a private army in the abandoned Dragon's Teeth villas again.

## Places of Interest in Tulumene

### Inns

#### Tulumene's Tower



The Tower is always busy, and justly worth the stiff prices. Without opulence, this is one of the most comfortable inns found anywhere, with all the little touches of thoughtfulness so often neglected elsewhere: plentiful hand-linen, comfortable footstools, shades for lamps that the guest can readily adjust without burnt fingers, and night-bars for the doors of nervous guests. Even the cheapest rooms, like the slope-ceilinged converted attic, have a private bathtub and share a lounge with two neighboring guestrooms. Owner and barkeeper Gevaal Tylemn responds swiftly to any complaints and is a fair, reasonable man quick to call in friends to put down rowdiness.

The dining room serves meals every two hours, day and night around, though the dark morning offerings tend to be breads, pastries, and stews that will see use through the day ahead. The street

serving-window does a ceaseless rush in selling merchants' packs: hand loaves filled with fish, onions, mushrooms, and spices. They're deliciously oily feasts to go, hot or cold, and cost 1 silver piece for a large one, or 2 to 3 coppers for smaller.

For a special occasion, ask Julda of the kitchens to do her stuffed giant squid. The squid itself is an inedible brown shell capable of breaking teeth, but the stuffing is made of crab and smoked fish of all sorts, cooked with whole onions and limes, spicy brown sauces, and minced pork. The platter that comes to the table, reeking of goodness, is as long as a short man is tall! Meals to remember; long live the Tower!

#### Starnar's Cozy Cove Rest



A long step down from the Tower, I fear, but the refuge of many who just can't afford to grace its beds. Starnar is a sarcastic, cynical crippled ex-sailor who does his best with a staff of nine or ten (I lost count) unruly daughters. He's outlived their three mothers and turned to innkeeping in desperation to feed them.

Everything in the Rest is shabby or mended—or both. There are rodents, but take care not to point them out unless you're in the mood for the entertainment of half a dozen unwashed girls throwing



daggers wildly at the scurrying rat, then racing after the fleeing thing, heedless of the tumult of furniture (and your belongings) they cause.

The daughters are seeking husbands and are overly friendly, but they do rush for pillows and linens if requested. Those who don't request may find their rooms rather sparsely furnished.

Don't stay here if you don't like rough sailors who are probably pirates, because Starnar's man-hungry daughters keep a steady stream of them in the Rest, devouring hearty black bread and great cauldrons of the thick, gluelike, spicy brown hog stew. I suspect "every dead bird we can gather" would be a more accurate description of most of the contents, as I kept finding beaks in my spoon.

If one can stomach the limited fare, let it be said that both the stew and the bread taste good and fill the belly—filling that stays down, too. When the boats come in, fresh pan-fried fish appear on the menu for those who can lay down a silver and a copper. The house beer is black, thick, and strong, if a little salty; a welcome change from the watered-down brews found in many port inns.

### Gundercove



This ramshackle former fish-shed smells of its former use and is full

of the damp of the docks. Several old wharves underlie it, unseen waters often slapping the dining room floor from beneath. The noises of screaming seabirds, cursing sailors, the crash of carelessly set down crates and barrels, and the creak of boats rubbing up against docks and pilings fill the air. Let it be said that the roof—an armorer's nightmare of overlapped, rusting shields, nailed down and sealed with whale-oil and seal-hides—does not, so far as I could discover, leak.

Let it further be said that in a storm, rain drums on the roof with a ceaseless, deafening thunder and the whole place creaks and yaws like a ship riding stormy seas. All sorts of cloaked men seem to rush in and out with urgent business that must be seen to while the rain is at its most blinding.

Yet even sailors need to sleep, and the Cove provides them with straw and rope mattresses or hammocks in tiny private rooms furnished with clothes pegs, a chair, nightbuckets, candle lamps, and a ewer of washwater. All of the basics are here, at prices that would seem cheap in Athkatla or Waterdeep but are steep enough for Tulumene.

Warning to the traveler: Any woman of at least average beauty who darkens the doors of the Cove will be asked her price.



## **Taverns**

### **The Fast Sails**



The Fast Sails is a decent, friendly house of drink and (limited) dining for all, run by a retired sailor, Jaxom Lester, who's handy with a blade or warning-club but easygoing to all but those who try to cheat him.

Adventurers, merchants, and sailors of all sorts are welcome here, and questions never pry. It's a place for talk and to relax, not for brawling, rowdy contests, or to see dancing or less-clothed foolery.

Poorer guests should try the Red Wyrn Ale, a mix of local brews that achieves a heavy smoothness despite lesser ingredients. Those with more to spare should make for the Dragontail or Blue Flagon, both dark ales with nutty tastes. The former is almost minty in its throat-clearing aftertaste, while the latter is warm and yeasty to the last sigh. Wines are a gamble on whatever boats last brought in, and Lester's whisky is like fire in the throat, bringing tears to the eyes with its strength. Not for nothing does he call it "Dagger In The Fire." At a silver piece a glass, it's the most expensive drink in the house.

Zzar, ports, sherries, and other beers can also be had. To hold it all down, Lester serves fish tarts, bacon tarts, eel tarts, clam tarts, seabird tarts, and frybread. The bread is

greasy, and the seabird tarts turned my stomach. The eel tarts are oily and salty, though some swear by them, and from time to time the clam tarts lay even rugged sailors low. But the fish tarts are good, and the bacon tarts are a mouth-watering delight. At three tarts for two coppers, it's generous fare.

### **The Sail At Sunset**



Typical of dingy dockside taverns everywhere, this is where old salts go for surroundings a trifle more quiet—and with less furniture broken over their heads—than at the Barrel or the Daggers.

There's a long, beautiful painting over the bar whose sunset glows shine through even the dirt and drink splatters. It shows a laden, obviously storm-torn ship running into harbor as the sun sets, a truly magnificent piece of heart-lifting work. But it's the only thing about the Sail that boldens the spirits.

Owner Kralbert Dightmaer keeps molestation of serving-wenches to a minimum by hiring only farm girls of surpassing warty ugliness with more muscle to them than most male warriors—and surly manners to match. The place gets cleaned solely by the expedient of pushing out drunken bodies with poles. The beer is watered down to the edge of open client rebellion, and butter-fried biscuits are the only food to be





had, unless Kralbert has bought a barrel of salted eels or squid. These can be had raw for "2 coppers a corpse," as he so charmingly, and fittingly, puts it.

Brawls are common, but order is restored by dousing the surviving combatants with seawater pumped from the harbor and aimed through a hose from behind the bar. Kralbert then wades in with his three hired thugs, great barrels of men with forearms thicker than the pillars that hold up the ceiling and fists larger than my head. Whips and clubs in their hands, they restore order without hesitating to pluck up a chair and smash down a belligerent foe.

No minstrel would ever dare show his face in the place. Table-dancers entertain after dark, but stop their writhing and flirting as soon as someone hires their company, whereupon both parties make for accommodations I thankfully never saw. One man returned with roaches scuttling down his breeches.

### **Belbuck's Barrel**



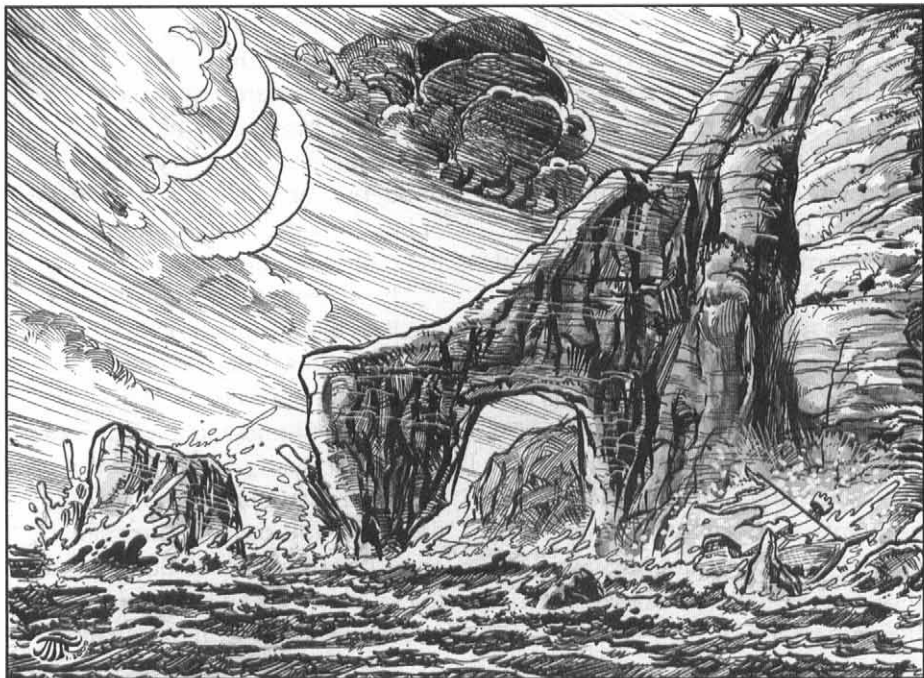
If the Sail is the quiet dive on the Tulmene docks, the Barrel is the noisy spot. Here men go to brawl, swagger before their neighbors, and make roaring fools of themselves. Belbuck keeps the place rather better lit than the Sail by

paying to have the ceiling enspelled to glow continuously; several disastrous broken-lamp fires were caused in brawls. He hoses the entire place down every three days or so, but the place is a maelstrom of laughing, fighting, shouting men the rest of the time.

There are no serving-wenchs at the Barrel any longer. Everything is now served across the bar in crumble-clay tankards to keep injuries and room damage to a minimum. One must push past two mountainous guards in plate armor to climb the stairs and pay extra to get a chair or table to sit at. Sometimes the leather-lunged bartenders, working six strong at a time along the bar, lead the crowd in a song. The ground floor room is now standing-space only and clear of furniture, though window-ledges running all around the room are just wide enough to fit a tankard.

The upstairs room has six round tables, firmly fastened to the floor, and four hulking guards. Anyone drawing a weapon or lifting up a chair will disappear under their clubs. At a table, one can choose to talk, buy food (dry, overdone breaded squid, fried potato sticks, or apples), or try to hire a little companionship.

The ladies are hardly young or handsome enough to tempt any man but a sailor who's spent a very long time at sea. But they serve many salts as friends to talk to,



confiding secrets about hidden treasure in particular: "If I come not back, Muradys, know ye . . ." Sailors can also catch up on news ashore from the ladies and pass along messages to other folk ashore or to sailors still at sea. For this reason, the "Hags of the Barrel" will be fiercely defended by any sailor who sees one being questioned or followed. To some of these men, the Hags are the only friends they have in the world.

### The Five Daggers



Law-abiding people, those carrying wealth, and those lacking six or so armed companions are all advised

to stay at least a street away from the dockfront that this roughest of Tulumennar taverns fronts onto. And don't even think about the alley; it is so choked with rotting dead things that only the desperate and dung-carters clamber into it.

The Daggers is for pirates, the lawless, and the poorest of sailors. They come here to make deals with each other, down the worst beer to be had in all Tethyr, and buy information. The bald half-orc who runs the place, dubbed "Ears" for his near bat-wings of protruding ears, sells gossip about piracy, the docks, and local politics and shady doings.

The traveler who needs to hire a thief, kidnapper, pirate crew, gang of toughs, or a killer should come



to the Daggers. All others should give it a wide miss, just as the town's children and escorts do. The only thing in skirts to habitually flounce into the Daggers was unmasked some years ago—with fatal consequences—as a mind flayer in disguise. She still visits, but no one grabs at her anymore.

## Velen

A lively fishing port whose cheerful folk belie the city's reputation as the most haunted settlement on all the Sword Coast, Velen is home to hardy, resourceful folk used to picking themselves up after misfortune and going on without bemoaning or delay.

Local folk largely ignore the phantoms that drift about the streets after dark, though there are a few dangerous ones (notably a slaying ghost that haunts Seven Cuts Court). The visitor can take heart in the fact that this city stands squarely against the pirates of the Nelanther, led by its popular, blustering mayor Whettimn, a retired adventurer of impressive girth. It can boast both well-disciplined city guardsmen and a rather formidable navy.

Velen is a walled city that fills a shallow bay between two hills: Captain's Cliff, a promontory to the west, and Widow's Hill to the east. Both are cloaked in the houses of the wealthy and noble. The visiting merchant will find vigorous local

mercantile folk, and all travelers will find Velen to be refreshingly lighthearted, not the "backwater of ghost-crazed folk" that many in Zazesspur to the south dismiss it as. Some personal debts made it unwise for me to linger long and survey all of its qualities of life. But through various disguises, I did manage to look at the most prominent places of interest for the traveler before making a hasty departure, and their descriptions follow hereafter.

## Places of Interest in Velen

### Inn

#### Morgan's Inn



This large, old, and rambling inn is comfortable, and with friendly staff. The owners are a young couple, Gordrith and Farlorea Snowcastle, from Zazesspur. Rooms are shaded with awnings against hot weather and well provided against storms with shutters and heavy draperies—cut-down sails, if the truth be told. Small fire-grates can be lit in every room, highbacked old chairs and footstools await in all bedchambers, and there's a common bookshelf for guests to enjoy.

Farlorea's stews are underseasoned and her breads are damp disasters, but three of her dishes delighted me. There's a cold lunch



of two plates: first celery and olives, then marinated herring topped with white mountains of sour cream. Fried yellow peppers, mushrooms, and swords (what folk in some lands call asparagus) are served in a broth of cream over lightly smoked silverfin. Finally, the evenfeast filled me to repletion and yet sat lightly on my stomach: thin-sliced apples around garlic cheese, followed by grilled chicken or lamb, both doused often and lovingly in red wine during their foray into the flames. Avoid the overly sweet cordials Gordrith offers in such profusion, and stick to a robust Old Logrin stout, or to Dragonfire, the deep amber sherry imported from Zazesspur and worth every bit of its 4 silvers per bottle.

Morgan's is famous across the Peninsula for its ghost. Aulimmer Morgan was a sea captain who slew the dragon turtle whose huge and lamp-hung head juts out from above the hearth to overhang the main table of the inn dining room. He was part owner of this inn and lived here when ashore, and his ghost now hoists drinks with guests in the tavern-room above the dining room. If the Snowcastles don't have a mug of hot cider or brandy and a plate of sausage ready for Morgan when the moon is full, he howls up and down the corridors like a demented giant bat, whispering loudly of the horrors he's seen. When happily drinking, Morgan is

almost always smilingly silent. When he speaks, folk have learned to listen, for his words are always cryptic warnings, portents of things soon to come, or hints as to what best to do next.

### **Inn & Festhall Blackthorn's Brew**



Perched on the garden-girt cityside slope of Captain's Cliff in grand opulence, Blackthorn's offers the best beer selection in the Peninsula, the best service in Velen, and luxurious furnishings befitting its marvelous food, beautiful escorts, and upper-crust clientele.

Offering no less than "forty-six suites of quality" and twelve lesser rooms lacking a city view, Blackthorn's is every bit as exclusive and superb as the best Waterdhavian establishments.

The staff, led by Housemaster Nilethon Ardree, is discreet and deft. They are masters of anticipation and thoughtfulness. Among the escorts are dancers, singers, musicians, and game-players of skill, verve, and enchanting beauty. Just to look upon Amandrāla of Calimport as she glides to her room is to catch one's breath in awe. Should she look up, an entire room of men come to dry-mouthed, still silence.

Dining here is always in one's own rooms, though guests can



entertain other guests as they please. There are several private chambers where business can be conducted in strict privacy.

Every meal I enjoyed at Blackthorn's was wonderful, but I must mention certain highlights, just as they come to mind:

- **Sunplash:** Fine, feathery sharpcheese ladled out generously over charthoor lettuce leaves and dressed with vinegar and a velvety, mushroom-studded fern gravy.
- **Turtleback Soup:** A green, briny delight served with medallions of cucumber.
- **From the Fields:** Crispy rice softcakes rolled around mashed potato, onion, and eggs, flecked with hot green shoots of wild onion.
- **Pride of Velen:** Turrets of steaming wild rice march down the center of a platter like castle battlements, separating snails drenched in brandy-lemon sauce from turkey smothered in a rich white wine sauce with just a hint of onion, swords, and mushrooms.
- **Sweetfire Ice:** Tamarind sauce over cream over a handful of ice—ah, a mouthful of bliss!
- **Sixroots Salad:** The promised half-dozen tubers, fried in butter to the edge of melting, garnished with radishes carved into little open flowers, and hand-sized rock crabs boiled into noodlelike softness.
- **Almost A-Wing:** Skewers of small, whole (well, beheaded and plucked) grouse and chicken. They are seared

in boiling oils until the lumps of meat start to fall off the steel before being laid on steamed potato cakes and rushed hot to your table on long, narrow platters.

- **Lastbowl:** Meant, as the name suggests, to finish a meal, this delight consists of lime, mango, and peach slices in a thick sweet syrup. It clears the throat and tingles, a sheer kiss of the gods on hot nights!

## Taverns

### The Yardarm



This is a rarity: a sailor's drinking den that offers both food and drink of quality. Tavernmaster Rhaligo Terntevven runs a clean, rather rustic taproom that seems to sprawls for miles. It is often full of a deafening din as patrons talk, laugh, and talk some more, but you'll find no brawls or gambling here. The patrons seem to keep the Yardarm their refuge.

Only sailors are welcome here, along with their "lanancys," or lady companions. (Many sailors who call regularly in Velen have girlfriends, so it's not wise to assume that a lanancy is a hired escort.) If someone steps through the door without the company of sailors, the place falls silent and everyone stares until the unwanted guest is embarrassed into leaving.

Sailors here dine with linens, finger-bowls of lemonwater to keep



clean, and attentive service. Every table has a servant perched on a stool, waiting to see to any need; they're young, rather homely lasses who treat patrons like a favorite uncle they've not seen in too long. Rhaligo has set out to treat sailors like nobles here, and succeeded.

Beyond the usual beers, the bar serves a surprising range of ciders, cordials, and teas, as well as zzar, sherries by the score, and some superb wines. I even saw a bottle of elverquisst in a pride of place on a high shelf. When times are chill, Rhaligo serves a turkey broth that is thick, filling, and can be had laced with sherry or without.

Viands at the Yardarm are sparing but excellent, being dominated by stews and sweet cakes and tarts. But I must mention the sides of savory dumplings and sweet fruit sauces that can be added to any meal for a mere copper. They are worth ten times the price or more; the dumplings are built around the kitchen scraps of cooked fowl and meat, and explode in the mouth with rich flavor. Add to the list the pan-fried potatoes swimming in lemon, garlic, and oil, and what the menu intriguingly describes as "Tonguelash," a platter of endive doused in old wine, chopped walnuts, a pinch of pepper, sliced pears, and strongly-herbed goat cheese.

I expected such fare in a haughty dining club in the best wards of Waterdeep, not in a sailors' tavern.

But it's good that Faerûn still holds such pleasant surprises as these. Just do your best to look like a sailor if you want to enjoy the Yardarm.

### The Figureheadless



It's inevitable that a city that holds the Yardarm will also have one of these: the other sort of sailors' tavern. This is the sort of place even well armed, experienced travelers would do well to steer clear of. It's a gloomy, smoke-filled dive named for a salvaged ship's figurehead that thrusts out of the front wall beside the door. The figurehead is in the shape of an Amnian dancing girl bare except for her bangles; in the wreck that claimed her ship, the *Last Lost Veil*, she was decapitated.

Thieves, former pirates, and not-so-former pirates are the clientele here. Respectable Velenese slip in here only to arrange smugglings and kidnappings, and to buy items that respectable folk can't get their hands on.

Beer can be had "good" (black and strong, a blend of brews and the leavings in tankards after drunken imbibers collapse) or "of the sea" (watered down with salt water, which makes most ill, though some sailors have grown tolerant of it).

The only food to be had is passable frybread, nausea-inducing





fishhead soup, and firecakes. These last are fish, rodents, and other "found meats" chopped and mixed with hot peppers to cover the taste of the decaying flesh, then breaded and hard-fried. They're for the strong of stomach only.

Go armed if you must enter here, and be prepared to use your weapons and use them well. It's not a place to fall asleep in, for obvious reasons.

Proprietor Jedro "Longhorns" Broamyr, a hulking thug of massive hands and a drooping moustache that hides his mouth, has come to an agreement with his pirate clients. He will never again, under any circumstances, drug any food or drink. That's a comfort.

## **Shops**

### **The Black Boat**



Not to be missed by mariners or anyone interested in sea gear, the Boat stands on Sarnsar Street next to the Yardarm. It looks like the ramshackle, listing-to-seaward old warehouse that it is, and only strong *firequench* spells have kept it standing. From front door to back, it's crammed with canvas sails, tarpaulins, coils of rope, waxed nets, anchors, lobster traps, buckets, replacement rail-pins, long sweeps, rudders, glass floats, barrels, and small open skiffs. Most impressive of all is a gigantic stuffed shark by

the name of "Spendimmer the Rightful Sea King of Waterdeep." It's eighty feet long with jaws a man can stand in, hanging at an angle from the roof in a cradle of chains.

A loft holds barrels of biscuits, and a flooded seawater-cellar keeps cool crates full of sealed jugs of fruit juices. A huge winch at one end of the Boat dispenses forearm-thick chain, which Thard Star, a huge, red-bearded giant of a man, will cut to length by breaking open links with blows of his huge forge-maul.

There are persistent rumors that Thard is a former pirate who still, somehow, has dealings with the sea wolves of the Nelanther. He stoutly denies such calumny and insists he serves all sailors. So he does; many sea captains or land-roving merchants consider their coin coffers and backsides saved by Thard's gear.

On the front inside wall, surrounding the door, Thard keeps a large selection of sturdy, well-made cart and wagon wheels brought from Scornubel for sale to merchants who suffer breakdowns on the roads around Velen. Nothing's very cheap here, but the wares are of the best quality and very handy for those in need.

### **Madame Iitaar**



This wrinkled, dignified old half-elven lady was once the striking



beauty of Velen, and older Velenese think the world of her. She lives above her comfortable little shop, which stands on Scrimshaw Lane just where it begins to climb Widow's Hill steeply, and answers the ringing of the little bell hanging beside the door at any hour.

Inside is a room furnished with two comfortable lounge-chairs and a crystal ball that no one has ever stolen because it is taller than a man, won't fit through any door in the shop, and floats a foot or so above the floor, obviously exuding some magic. The rippling gold-and-green lights of seawater shallows in the sun play around the room constantly, making some who enter it quite ill. Some folk in Velen say that if Iitaar is attacked, she can make the crystal pour forth deadly lighting and even emit tentacles.

For fees that are surprisingly modest, the old lady will divine events on and under the sea. She claims skill only in discerning events concerning the waters that touch the western coast of Faerûn (that is, the Sea of Swords as far as Evermeet, down the Sword Coast to the Shining Sea, and around Chult, where her powers fade "somewhere past Mhair but short of Var the Golden"). She is a good listener, seeming truly interested in the doings and desires of her clients. This has led some folk to whisper that she must be a spy. But others

say the old diviner is simply lonely, facing a long twilight of her days without the fame and suitors that once were hers—and sitting as close to fabled Evermeet as she is ever likely to get.

## Temples

### **Shipsgrave Tower**

Tall and dark, the local temple to Umberlee stands on the north side of Sundown Street, just inside the Sea Gate. Sea winds moan and keen within it constantly, even when the weather outside the temple is calm. The gloom within resounds with the crash of surf, the cries of souls doomed to drown, and the groaning and shudders of ships breaking apart.

Twice a year, the robed and cowed priests of the goddess shuffle down to their own dock, used by no one else out of fear and because it dips under the water to lose itself in slime. They bear the rotting body of a man drowned at sea, lashed to a chair, which they submerge while a hymn is sung and offerings are made to Umberlee. No Velennese dare to disturb this holy rite, for Umberlee is said to be able to hurl bolts of lightning from the temple spire at those who displease her. Even if that's mere myth, the hooded priests are said to be retired pirates with rage in their hearts and sharp weapons riding under their vestments.



## Dolphin's Leap

Newest and brightest of Velen's temples, this slender holy house of Valkur is crowned by a leaping silver dolphin statue that arcs out over Riptide Walk, the most-traveled of Velen's streets. The temple proper is in large cellars underlying the dolphin entry, but the Velenese have been slow to join the congregation that worships here.

Whereas the clergy of Umberlee discourage all who do not worship their goddess from advancing further into their temple than the forechamber, the clergy of the Leap sell charts to all who venture into the entry-house. A veteran sailor whose judgment I trust deemed such charts "pretty, very readable, and accurate—though much is left out." For fees, they also will purge leeches and other sea parasites from the stricken, venture forth to spell-mend nets and storm-damaged boats, and bless vessels in the name of Valkur. It remains to be seen, of course, whether such eagerness and generosity remains as bright when the temple becomes well established.

## The Home of the Stalwarts

This stout stone fortress is actually a chapterhouse and temple of Helm, the oldest of Velen's surviving shoreside buildings, its eldest temple, and (some argue) "the anchor on which Velen was built."

Such folk are probably correct. Velen could not help prospering in the face of pirate might when the city stood in the protective shadow of the Stalwart Knights, who formerly served as a city guard and now police the lands around against brigandry, smuggling, and pirate activity. "They keep the local thieves' guilds from seizing the city by the throat," one citizen muttered to me as we watched the Stalwart Knights change their temple guard with much saluting.

This ritual, performed four times a day, is all most Velenese see of the holy temple rites, except for the Vigil: At sunrise and sundown, fully armored Knights assume stock-still guard positions on the temple battlements to watch the passage of the sun.



# Fire Drake Shores

**T**he relatively sheltered eastern shore of Fire-drake Bay is a lush and pleasant coastline where folk live simply, at peace with the land rather than at constant war with it. Druids are common, and their reverence for growing things even more so. County Greenshores is well named. City folk may sniff at such "rude and rustic backwaters" or prize only the relative paucity of brigands, but I must remind such critics that a lack of crowding, filth,

and close-packed stone buildings is not viewed universally as a terrible failing.

The traveler in search of seeds and live plants will find ample supplies here, so long as they buy, not take for themselves. Every tree and bank, it seems, has its fierce human guardian, and such defenders can often count on the aid of capable, experienced adventurers. A number of chartered bands and companies inhabit fortified homes hidden away along local roads, just a horn-call away.



A small misunderstanding involving one such band forbids your humble scribe from entering Port Kir or the lands easily reached from it on patrol, so my tour here ends at the southern signpost of Mosstone.

For what it's worth, the aging wizard of the self-styled "Knights of the Shore" was neglecting his two pretty lady apprentices, anyway. Those seeking passionate sorceresses of middling skills but striking beauty should look in the markets of Port Kir for Dazaratha and Haelume. They'll be the ones struggling to carry baskets of provender back to Knights far too lazy, arrogant, and corpulent to deserve them.

Should your attentions be discovered, tell them Volo sent you. Or not, as you prefer. Their master, Kelmarindar Oth, promised me a brief but exciting (pot-boiling, in fact) career as a cabbage. Perhaps he'll prove more generous with you.

The presence of the churlish Knights and other formidable bands, such as the all-lady Swords of the Black Opal (rumored to work as shore "goods-guards" for certain pirates) and the Men of the Swift Arrow, should not prevent the prudent traveler from enjoying some sights of interest. Just take care not to despoil or trespass on lands guarded by turreted manors or tiny "toy keeps."

## **The Black Tomb of the Corsair**

Built by King Errilam before his untimely death, this black basalt landmark is the royal resting-place of his father, King Haedrak II, the "Corsair Prince." Today, the riven tomb looks like the reaching fingers of a broken hand, rising in a cluster of stumps and rubble from the exposed crest of a cliff northeast of Mosstone along Firedrake Road. Below it is a small cove and mooring used by Haedrak while he was a pirate fighting against the rule of his usurper uncle, Kymer the Shade King. In all of Tethyr, Haedrak claimed that this cliff afforded the best view, looking between both peninsulas out to the open sea, and so he was buried here.

Haedrak was much loved, so this was one of the few monuments that escaped damage or ruin during the Black Days. Yet in the decades since, ogres have knocked over and shattered the onyx statue of Haedrak and plundered the cairn for gold and riches.

The Black Tomb now lies broken and empty. Haedrak's body and royal treasures are missing, and stories have spread that the king's ghost wanders the nearby road, seeking champions to avenge this insult. Most minstrels sing that should Haedrak's grim shadow find aid to strike at the ogres, who still dwell in the forest to the northeast, he'll reveal the location of his last treasures as a reward to his avengers.



## The Druids' Drive

The Trade Way between Mosstone and Port Kir gains this name for the many independent druids who dwell in sylvan simplicity along the forest edge east of the road. If one's name is not Volo, this is the safest of all stretches of the Trade Way. The relative abundance of adventurers hereabouts discourages brigands from bothering caravans or even lone peddlers. Ruffians of the road have long since discovered that it's easier to avoid capture if one operates to the south along the Prince's Road, among the many heights and clefts of the Starspires.

Maps show this land as cleared and no longer part of the Wealdath. But there are so many stands of trees that the traveler might be forgiven for mistaking the countryside as a garden where that forest is being born, or perhaps wrack left behind as it recedes, like the glistening wet in the wake of a retreating wave.

## Firedrake Bay

The Dragon's Neck Peninsula protects this deep, expansive bay from the fiercest winter storms. Firedrake Bay's sheltered waters, though no stranger to pirate keels, are calm for much of the year. Important as a refuge from both cruel seas and the reavers of the Nelanther, the bay remains a popular place to beach and refit for repairs, or to anchor and await

company for the dangerous voyage out and around—or through, if one is truly weary of life—the Nelanther.

The bay is named for the many firedrakes that have always dwelt on its southern edge along the Starspur. They were among the first beasts seen by Calishite explorers sailing the coasts. Its sun-warmed, unspoiled waters also offer ideal conditions for fish, and they are found here in large shoals, perhaps because commercial fishing has curiously never been heavy here. Passing boats may trawl nets, but local fisherfolk either work in tiny open boats, or sail out beyond the Tusks from Tulmene to take the larger fish of the open seas. Most small-boat fisherfolk call Port Kir home, but watch for their simple roadside stalls if you're traveling the Trade Way. Smoked "jaws" of fish—actually the heads, steamed with forest berries and herbs—are delicious saddle-munch fare.

Local legend insists that many fish spawn in their own sunken city: a huge castle that fell out of the sky in ancient days and lies somewhere in the western depths of the bay. If it does exist, this treasure-trove would most likely be a relic of lost Netheril. Many have searched for it in vain, but locals counter those who scoff at its reality with the suspicion that it has been hitherto concealed by now-failing shielding magics and protected by monstrous inhabitants.





The borders of Firedrake Bay are the Green Shore, which in turn gives the County of Greenshores its name; the two peninsulas of the Dragon's Head and the Starspur; and the Tusks, where the windy, open waters of the Race begin.

## **Firedrake Road**

A winding trail runs west and north from Mosstone, meandering along the coast of Firedrake Bay and out onto the peninsula. This hard-packed, wheel-rut road skirts heavy forest rather than plunging into it. Tiny, often nameless hamlets are strung along it like pierced pearls on a necklace string. The most notable are Valtreth (where a few cottages where weavers make nets), Rock Orchard (where one can find apples), Viperstone (where Calishite alchemists catch baskets of poisonous snakes sunning themselves), and Toaketh (where its namesake, a reclusive mage lies in a simple, often-plundered grave).

The magical method Ildabar Toaketh devised for attaching certain gemstones to steel to make blades of deadly sharpness that never lose their edge is used by several local crafters. But none since Toaketh have known how to apply the technique to a length of steel longer than a man's fingers without making it too brittle for use, so it remains Mystra's blessing for cooks and cloth-cutters, and useless for weaponry.

"Toaketh knives" are crescents of steel held by wooden handles from above, so that the metal curves along the knuckles. One cuts by rocking such blades back and forth. They command prices ranging from a low of 7 silver pieces along the Sword Coast, where they are relatively easy to obtain, to a high of 16 gold pieces or more in Impiltur or the Vilhon, where crafters prize them.

The Firedrake Road is winding and difficult at times, narrowing to a rocky trail where folk must travel afoot or use only small carts in a single file. It leads out to Tulmene, but it also forks at Khalid's Wall, heading north to Murann. Beware the northern fork, which dissolves into overgrowth and is favored as a hunting ground for both brigands and human-hunting elves.

## **Monastery of Saint Domin**

Dedicated only recently (in 1361 DR, the Year of Maidens), this cloister of Ilmater stands beside the Firedrake Road about a half-day's travel north of where the trail from Mosstone meets the coast. Once a baronial manor of County Kargrove, it became a haunt of wild dogs after it was burnt-out and abandoned after the Black Days. Monks of Ilmater recently repaired its walls and buildings, and they dedicated the grounds to St. Domin, a Velannese shipbuilder of ages past whose love of, and charity to, children gained him sainthood.



The Holy House of Domin is a school and orphanage for the young charges of the Dominian monks. The monks live in the impressive stone manor proper and use the remnant of an outlying wing as their chapter house. Behind the main buildings is a small chapel to Ilmater; its bells ring thrice daily to summon all who dwell in the monastery to worship.

A long set of stone steps leads down from the manor to the shore and a sea cove beneath the grounds. Here the apprenticeships of orphans begin, as they learn St. Domin's craft of shipbuilding. After a ship is built, some of the monks and older children sail it around the Starspur and south to the River Ith, then to the docks of Saint Cabram's Missionary in County Elemetar, east of Myratma, for sale.

For stiff fees (300-600 gp a head, the price increasing with the monks' suspicions), non-Ilmatari desiring to learn something of navigation and seamanship may accompany the monks on such voyages. No more than three such guests will be carried on any voyage, and they are allowed no weapons (belt knives may be given to the monks for safekeeping until the voyage ends). Their belongings are limited to what they can carry aboard, unaided, in a single chest, coffer, or sack.

Many charges leave Domin as young men to work as coopers, for

barrel-making employs similar knowledge of woods, their steaming and shaping, and their sealing. Others become boatbuilders up and down the Sword Coast and along trade routes east. "Domin bold" is an expression sometimes heard along the Sword Coast for a barrel or chest that has sustained a long fall without breaking.

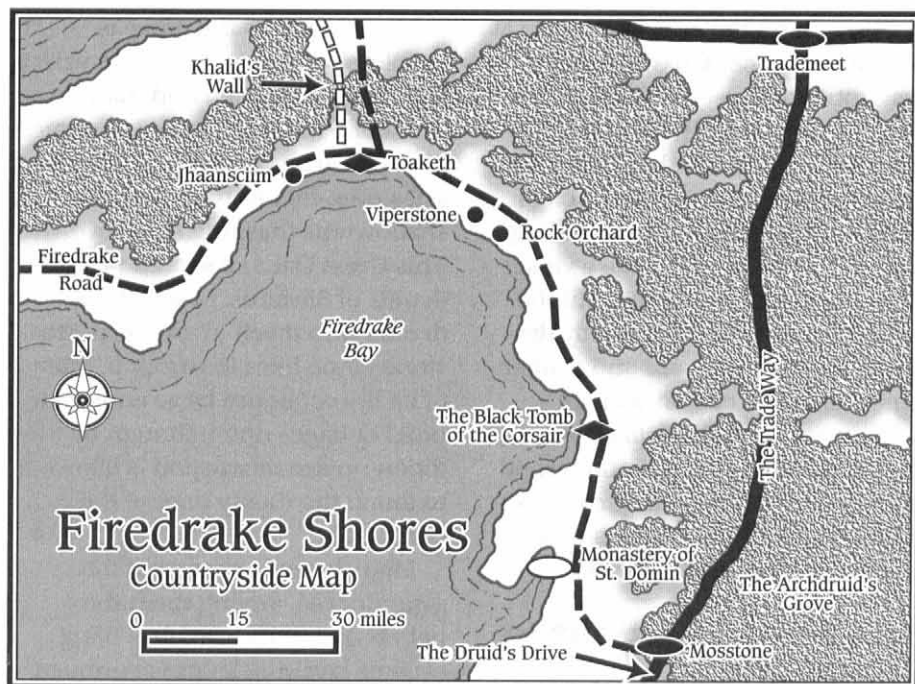
All cloisters of Ilmater use a flower as their local symbol, a different blossom from those of other Ilmatari monasteries. This tiny device can be found on wall-stones and vestments. The symbol of the Holy House of Domin is the mountain daisy, depicted as a lifelike tangle of three tiny, ochre- to yellow-hued flowers.

## Mosstone

A high-walled caravan town surrounded by the green cloak of the Wealdath (towering shadowtop trees and moss-girt oaks and duskwoods, in particular), Mosstone is a place of good-natured ease, unhurried contentment—and druids, druids everywhere.

A compact of townsfolk and druids governs the place, but the constables of Mosstone, some twenty to thirty foresters, obey every druid's commands without hesitation, unless a senior or more locally known priest of the trees countermands such an order.

Soft green moss covers many lanes here, everyone has a garden



that looks more like a lush wild tangle than a formal planting, and rustic cottages are the order of the day. Caravan beasts are kept to a walled Drovers' Field in the northeastern corner of the walls; the ever-present sea breezes keep the smell away from the town. Growing fences and walls of bound and trimmed thornvines, for instance, are preferred to those made of dead timber, and fragrant herbs spill out of hanging baskets everywhere. At the right time of year, berries of all sorts hang for the picking on almost every wall, gate, and arch.

Mosstone is a damp, shaded place, with springs arising in many a cellar. Frequent washings keep

molds at bay, but nothing here will bake dry in the sunlight unless taken well out of town.

The traveler seeking a wide range of wares to buy or the bustle of a city will be disappointed here. But the wayfarer who delights in that small-town "everyone knows everyone" feel will be at home.

Hasty travelers are warned that Mosstonians work with calm, unhurried efficiency unless urged to haste—whereupon they become positively sleepy. The way to make a local jump into a frenzy is to set something afire. But this is a tactic best used by those who can run fast enough to outrun not only enraged foresters but elven arrows.



Pleasant on the eyes and rustic at first appearance, Mosstone is a waystop town every bit as expert at feasting on the travelers' purses as caravan stops in harsher lands. The plants everywhere and the lack of overbearing rulers or tall buildings makes this seem more like a village than many smaller towns. But the boisterous traveler will swiftly discover that ever-present and numerous druids can call on veteran adventurers to foil any lawlessness, including attempts to vandalize, pilage, or burn. Worse, they can summon treants or giant eagles with surprising ease and alacrity.

## Places of Interest in Mosstone

### Unique Sites

#### The Archdruid's Grove

North and east of the walled town, along a wide, clear moss-paved dirt road, is the dwelling-place of the Archdruid of Mosstone. It is a large, circular clearing surrounded by a living wall of huge, arrow-straight shadowtop trees. Anyone who speaks aloud the word "please" while traversing this trail causes a faint sphere of blue-white *faerie fire* to coalesce out of the air in front of him. It lights his way as he proceed, fading away when the end of the trail is reached. Such lights hover patiently above a traveler who has stopped, collapsed, or fallen asleep.

The ground in the grove is absolutely flat and cloaked in velvet-soft moss. A gnarled and many-branched oak rises from the center of the clearing, reaching into the skies even higher than the giant shadowtops that ring the grove. This Great Oak is a sacred place to druids of Silvanus. Many of the druids who dwell in and near Mosstone come here to worship. Many of its branches are large enough to build cottages upon, though by tradition no axe or weapon is allowed to touch the mossy bark of the Great Oak.

Many legends surround this gigantic tree, among them the beliefs that in its branches hang crowns awaiting kings yet unborn and enchanted swords brought here after being lost or buried in many forests. Perhaps under its roots is a cavern containing a throne of mighty magical powers, a pool in which visions can be seen, and stone caskets in which lie entombed kings and certain beings who yet live, but have slept for ages. Some Mosstonians believe that each Archdruid steps into the Great Oak as he feels death coming upon him, and merges forever with it. Others insist fiercely that an Archdruid near death goes alone into the forest and walks to Old Oak Dell, there becoming an oak to join his many predecessors.

Southeast of the Great Oak stands the Aldinus, a large, low stone



building cloaked in vines and ivy, its sliding stone doors perfectly round. The Archdruid dwells here with a staff of messengers and servants of the grove (woodland beings and loyal werebeings among them). Behind hidden doors are small, rounded rooms where seeds are stored against times of blight, drought, and winter-sear. Here is also a large meeting hall used for Mosstone's town meeting—and, in past years, for the Interregnum Tribunal.

In the perpetual shade just east of the Aldinus, between it and the ring-wall of shadowtops, stands Newleaf House, a seminary for novice druids. It is a rambling, curve-walled building whose walls are living trees that hold up a gigantic ridged slab of stone as their roof. The windows can only be closed by shutters; the breezes blows through the building all year long. (Enduring extremes of temperature is part of druidic training.) Here mushrooms and other food plants are grown.

Clear across the Grove, northwest of the Great Oak, stands a cone-shaped wooden building, the Seirystrum. This library and house of meditation for the druids of Mosstone is always open, lighted within by soft spell-glows. It has its own watchghost guardians, who prevent bookworms and other predators from attacking the books and scrolls within. They can swoop

across the grove to turn away foes of the druids, and have other sacred and secret tasks, among them "The Waiting." Or so it was whispered to me. Just what they wait for, I could never learn.

But perhaps the most eerie denizens of the Archdruid's Grove are the druids known simply as the Becloaked. These druids are practically buried beneath their thick, heavily cowled gray robes. Not even the tiniest aspect of their faces are visible beneath the hood, and their hands and feet rarely appear from beneath the voluminous folds.

A group of three Becloaked seems to patrol the Archdruid's Grove at all times, though their slow walk follows no discernable pattern. From time to time they encircle a particular tree and remain motionless for several minutes, then continue their rounds.

When they speak, it is always in the form of a harshly whispered question. Your humble scribe, being much intrigued by this, attempted to engage the Becloaked in conversation in an effort to worm a declarative sentence out of them. But my efforts were cut short with a sinister-sounding "Don't you have anything better to do?"

It's obvious that novice druids avoid the Becloaked—I saw a large group of them do an about-face on the path to the Seirystrum just to avoid confronting them. The watchghosts seem to ignore the



Becloak, however, and I never got the chance to see higher-ranking druids interact with the mysterious trio.

What troubled me the most about the Becloak was a glimpse I caught of a hand beneath the robe as one pointed for me to leave. I'm not entirely certain, but the hand had a greenish sheen and seemed to be covered with tiny, iridescent scales. It might have been a glove. If so, it was a tight-fitting one.

## Inns

### The Oak-Father's Boon



Owned by kindly Father Olondar Rajam, an elderly priest of Eldath who's considered a friend by every Mosstonian, this inn is a dimly lit, plant-festooned series of round-walled, pleasant rooms. Many druids, including the current Arch-druid, frequent the Boon, as does Jordy Gallum, the Count of Green-shores and former head constable of Mosstone. On rare occasions, elves out of the Wealdath can be found here. The friendly staff here serves a constant, complimentary stream of cooling juices and hot teas, accompanied by nut and berry biscuits made in the Boon kitchens.

All meals are a flat gold coin, though one can eat to repletion for this, asking for more of this and less of that, and all of it is done "just so."

I was advised that the time of

year very much affects what is offered here. Standards seem to include silky salmon and prawn tarts, spicy carrot and ginger soup, and a lamb shank that melts under the knife and in the mouth—truly one of the most delectable dishes I've ever tasted. I ate until I was almost sick, and then lay on my bed savoring it all over again in memory. Also delightful is the fiercely mint-scented wine sausage, and a bowl of hares (diced hares stewed half a day in a sauce of cloves, cinnamon, and diced leek, then served with medallions of toasted egg-bread).

During my visit, evenfeasts consisted of two removes: lamb kidneys both smoky and garlicky, followed by crisp-roasted duck that was less so.

Surprisingly, highsun meals were even better. The locals must think so too, for the lower rooms of the Boon were suddenly standing room only. Guests are always encouraged to dine in their rooms or in the upper floor lounges, on comfortable chairs with one's own table—ah, bliss!

A typical highsun meal is as follows: A hot dish of grilled leek clears the throat for a succession of small olive oil crust pies like upland tart, forester's, streamside, and bounty. All were surprisingly good, and I saw merchants order sacks of their favorite tarts to eat from the saddle as they rode on.





In a town adorned with surprisingly good inns, the Boon is the crown.

### **Rumnthorygh's Welcoming House**



The large inn, run by the gruff but kindly Alzarro Rumnthorygh, was formerly Mosstone's "cheap and cheerful" accommodation, and it's always crammed as a result. It's easily spotted by its long, ramshackle wooden porch, whose mismatched ends are a rearing unicorn and a mermaid clutching a man to her breast. Both are bowsprits from Firedrake Bay shipwrecks.

Starting a season ago, prices have risen to pay for a new wing out back. Rumnthorygh was getting tired of sleeping in the stable rafters and having his kitchen turned into a roaring chaos that couldn't possibly feed all the hungry risers that he had no room to seat anyway. Now larger and roomier, the Welcoming House lives up to its name with thoughtful touches such as bootjacks, bedside towels, and a disrobing chair that doubles as a cloak- and hat-drying rack.

The specialty of Rumnthorygh's kitchen is bread and onion stuffed chicken, sweetly melting into a fragrant chaos under its load of gravies and sauces. I highly recommend it amid an array of simple but well-cooked dishes. You'll find

nothing spectacular, but no disappointments either.

Despite the expansion, the Welcoming House is apt to be noisy and almost always full, but you'll find a cheerful staff and guests who seem to catch that attitude from them.

### **The Stag Triumphant**



If Mosstone didn't have the Boon, this establishment would shine forth proudly. As it is, this dark wood-paneled, elegant house stands squarely between the Boon and the Welcoming House in the luxury and satisfaction of its accommodations and provender. Think fine old furniture in rich, dark leathers, curtains along dark and thick-carpeted passages that stretch for seeming miles, and uniformed, deft staff who welcome adventurers and exotic wayfarers with the same graceful ease with which they receive Mosstonians. They even remember guests' names and preferences over long years. Young lads and lasses of striking beauty enliven old and friendly faces each year, too.

Morningfeast is chopped bacon and sausage cheese omelets, superb with chopped onion and peppers. For highsunfeast, the Stag specializes in "meal in a bowl" cuisine, accompanied by flavorful breads and garlic and herb butters. The bowl contains a stew:



sometimes highly spiced eel and mushroom, sometimes honey and lemon chicken in thick green-shoots broth, and sometimes oyster and almond (which is especially fine).

Sherries, cordials, and zzar reign supreme here, though wines and beer can be had. At evenfeast, roasts reign supreme. One is always the signature "stag triumphant," which turns out to be a buck stuffed with herbs (notably basketfuls of parsley) bread stuffing, and a secret stew of pungent spiced meats. Oxen, boar, and turtles are always roasted on flanking spits, and the dining seems to go on all night.

Those who desire to slake thirsts with nightcaps can get platters of salted and smoked ham to whet their appetite for more drink, too. It's a delightful alternative, and a touch I wish more houses of hospitality would imitate.

## **Taverns**

### **Walking Out To Meet The Dragon**



Behold, on a back lane in Mosstone, that rarest of things: a clean, friendly, relatively quiet drinking den. Privacy comes from high-walled booths, many with curtains. Comfort is achieved by seating patrons in well-worn, overstuffed lounges whose mismatched state betrays salvaged origins from grand homes elsewhere.

Drinks are average in price but generous in quantity and broad in variety. Everything short of elverquisst and similar rarities can be had here, and the extensive cellars sometimes yield surprises. It's said the young Prince Azoun, traveling as disguised as anyone can be with an escort of four wary War Wizards, once enjoyed an entire cask of a no-longer-made vintage of Suzail here. The cellars of his own Palace had run out of it.

The centerpiece of the taproom, the Endless Fall, provides a show but exists primarily to make a cheerful babble and burble so as to drown out talk from carrying to unintended ears. Picture an endless upright ring of moving water, worn stylishly by an untidy pile of stones set with glass-shielded candles. Spells make water cascade noisily down a fall of rocks into a glass bowl plungepool and then "fall" upward, to begin the descent again. The candles light the falling waters from behind and the bowl from below, sending dancing reflections rippling endlessly across the walls and ceiling. A few folk say this makes them feel seasick or just plain ill. But most love it at first sight, admire it for a night, and then accept it as part of the furnishings.

Oh, yes, the name: The builder of the tavern, the now-deceased adventurer Flindarl Alaekynjack, named this inn for the bravest thing he ever did. He walked out alone, in



a cold sweat of fear, to face a marauding dragon.

He was the decoy for a band of adventurers, who smote the wyrm with spells and fury from behind as it pounced playfully on Flindarl. Though crippled by its jaws, he somehow survived the fray and built this fine tavern with his share of the dragon's treasure. Flindarl welcomed adventurers, outcasts, half-orcs, the disfigured, and all to drink at his tavern, and made a lot of firm friends.

They now love and respect Flindarl's daughter, whom they saw grow from a wisp to a wench and now to a jovial, strapping mountain of a woman, her shoulders as mighty as many a hulking warrior's.

Kardeera has run the "Walking Dragon," as most locals refer to the place, since Flindarl's death a decade ago. (Her mother died a few years before that of some strange fever that made her cough black, oily blood.) She can lift and hurl tables, though she prefers to joke and loom over unruly patrons about to erupt in violence. She's no slouch with a sword, but she specializes in the best dirty brawling tricks, from kicking stools up into the faces of foes to shifting them so they'll slip in puddled beer underfoot. Nor is she slow to hurl her own glassware at the heads or faces of foes, though she prefers befriending roisterers to breaking their bones.

Kardeera longs to be swept off her feet by a gigantic, mighty-muscled knight of iron strength but secret tenderness—if any such person exists. She talks of this sometimes, near dawn, and several adventurers have tried to be the man she's seeking, thus far without success.

### **Jessyleia's Drinking Jack**



The Jessajack (as locals dub it) is a glittering, new drinking den opened by a successful Calishite silks dancer who sometimes gets up on her own bar for brief surprise performances when the mood takes her. This place is bright; too bright for my taste. It's also too heavy on pinks and purples in the curtains and gauzy screens in front of the lights, making everyone look extra-planar and strange. There's often music—loud music, of the bellow-drum and blast-horns variety. Prices on the adequate beer cellar and rather thin selection of wines are city-high.

Only sweet finger-pastries and little decorated cakes are offered for the belly in the Jessajack. Far too many patrons preen here, posing themselves to be seen and talking far too loudly of their oh-so-important lives, often involving private conferences with rulers and archmages to whom they tender eagerly sought advice. Want



to be noticed, and pay a shade too much for everything? This is the place.

Still, the bar is of painted swirl-glass over embedded shells, bones, daggers, and a lone eyeball I hope is false. Jessyleia's dances are breath-taking (more than that, to males), and this is the only tavern I've ever been in where I could dine happily and healthily off the spotless floor tiles.

### The Drover's Last Drink



Just outside one of the gates that links Drovers' Field with Rimmon's Lane stands the Drink, a long, sagging-roofed and ramshackle building that is always busy, day and night. Lanterns hang from its roof-posts, marking the extent of spells that keep insects at bay; some drovers always duck in here to rid themselves of ticks or stinging ants when arriving in town after a long journey. The visitor will be struck immediately by the lack of amenities.

There are no tables, chairs, or even front walls at the Drink. The only furnishings are jakes at either end of the long bar, stools bolted to the floor in front of it, and an extended porch that thrusts a roof perhaps twenty feet out from the bar to give some shelter to standing drinkers. As caravan wagons are gathered or dispersed in Rimmon's

Lane, drovers, outriders, and passengers alike repair to the Drink to slake the throat and snatch a bite.

The food on offer here is all of the portable, hold-in-the-hand variety. Smallpies are three for a copper, and large pies are a copper each. Most drovers take the hand-sized smallpies, but those who've time to sit at one of the stools and wield a knife are urged to try the larger, served thoughtfully in bowls. Chicken pie, pheasant pie, and quail pie are uniformly crusty, golden, and bathing in brown mushroom gravy when cut into. They're the best, though a newcomer is sure to be told the tale of the human finger found by one diner in his pie, years ago.

Those looking for something sweet usually turn to the rhubarb and many-berry tarts because a copper piece buys seven of them, but those who can settle for four smaller viands for their copper are urged to try the tamarind balls. The influence of Calimshan and the Tashalar can be tasted in these sugar-dusted soft morsels that are by turns sour and sweet. Delightful!

Despite the rough company, crime and unpleasantness are almost unknown at the Drink. For one thing, most folk are too tired. For another, drovers and hire-swords dispense swift and brutal justice when the need arises, and many are expert throwers of tankards at fleeing thieves. Further,



everyone knows that the constables drop by here often to see who's arriving in town or departing.

## **Festhall**

### **The Dryad's Dreams**



This establishment receives an inn rating because most Mosstonians treat it as an inn of relaxed dress and talk, rather than the wild and raucous palaces of revelry that pass as festhalls elsewhere.

Rooms can be rented by the hour, night, or highsun to highsun, and they are used by four sorts of clientele. Some desire absolute quiet and privacy to sleep, assume disguises, study spells, or for some other exacting task. Others wish to talk or conduct business in the same complete privacy. Some Mosstonians don't want to be seen together by their fellow citizens, such as fierce business rivals who've fallen in love and are vainly hoping everyone in town hasn't noticed. Finally, the festhall attracts those in the mood for a frolic, with or without hired professional company.

Most visitors visit the Dream for a good time, and most Mosstonians use it to talk business, politics or gossip freely, without fear of being overheard.

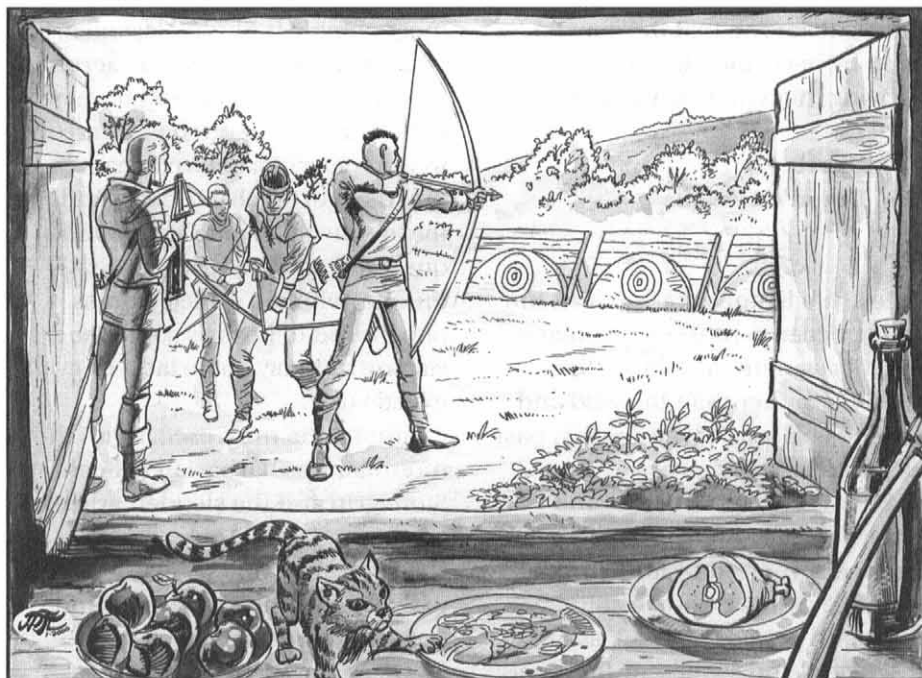
Mosstone can boast at least twenty stunningly beautiful human and half-elven women. Among the

most notable is Shulla Barandai, a retired adventuress whose acrobatics can demonstrably still have her out a window untouched by arrows in the space of a drawn breath in the midst of an elven volley. And there's the tall, white-haired, and queenly mature matron Derez-dreene, who is a skilled actress often hired to pose as someone's visiting mother, noble lady, or even exiled ruler.

Among the male escorts are the mountainous barbarian Ardogh Stonegrip and the slender, graceful Chalavon Narthiir, who can out-speak any haughty sage or wizard when called upon to do so—and beat most of them at chess.

These rooms have thrice-lockable doors and are completely soundproof. Visitors enter the cross-curtained passages by a variety of screened entrances off the main floor taproom. Every room can be departed through its windows, all of which open soundlessly, or via several concealed doors in the passageway that can't be opened from outside the festhall.

Walls, floors, ceilings, and furnishings at the Dream are all of one flowing piece. Spells have been used to shape wood into booths, tables, and stools, and only lounge chairs are separate, portable items. Three living oaks—rumored to be the homes of sleeping dryads, of course—form the support pillars and ceiling of the Dream's ground



floor, dominating the taproom. The festhall is pleasantly warm all year through, damp, and smelling faintly of sweet flowers, spices, and growing things.

The Dream is owned by a hardy, broad-minded retired forester, Hlargrim Sturnshon. His nine sleekly beautiful daughters wear brief "dryad gowns" of dyed and stitched leather designed to look like leaves as they serve patrons in the taproom, often cheerfully trading kisses and caresses with regulars. All have long falls of glossy brown hair, ivory-hued skin, and large dark eyes always winking or sparkling. They are flirtatious and utterly unoffendable; I could only learn the names of Braetha, the

eldest; Kalaeria, Charethra, and Hestroone, the brat of the brood.

The favorite service they perform? Washing the feet of tired travelers, and giving backrubs to foresters who've swung axes all day. Mosstonians who've dislocated a shoulder or fingers often come to Hlargrim to be set right by his expert hands.

All in all, the Dream is a delightful place, despite the slender but superb selection of provender and drinkables. Of the latter, I recommend the mint wine for those desiring something different. For those who like their tankard to provide them with a meal, I recommend the blackroot beer; one practically has to chew this brew to get it down.





On the menu, standouts include the egg platter, a generous array of hard-boiled quail, swiftwing, grouse, and goose eggs, all on a bed of spices ready for dipping and rolling. Go easy on these unless you've plentiful wine or beer in hand to sluice away tongue-burning fires. Also magnificent is "Secret of the Trees": roasted garlic froth, toasted walnuts, and wild mushrooms on a bed of stewed sweet peppers. It is mouthwatering even in memory!

## **Shops**

### **A Kiss Across The Table**



Run by Maeragha Olgarlar, a jolly, motherly woman of flashing eyes and a tall, gaunt build, the Kiss sells perfumes, love potions, lingerie, and revel-masks. Racks hold daring fancy-dress costumes, fine gowns, while shelves display flowers treated with "neverwither" enchantments, cosmetics, false fingernails, false eyelashes, wigs, "whirlglow" candle-lanterns, and heart-shaped and hand-sized gift boxes. Also noteworthy is the spike-healed footwear in a variety of styles, from mock monster claw to thigh-high lace-up leather. So far as I and all the local traders know, the Kiss is the only place in all the Firedrake Shores where one can buy red leather boots and corsetry.

Maeragha is a kindly retired courtesan of old Tethyr whose tall build forever kept her from being the dancer and leading actress she longed to be. She's cheerful and merry, delighting in giving comfort and good advice, and in befriending her clientele. Many of her customers, in particular the local dancers and lady escorts, regard her as the mother they wish they'd always had. She delights in assisting folk choose fancy dress and is said to have once enthusiastically disguised the rotund (and rather disgusted) adventurer Mirt as a lace-bosomed matron, to allow him to lure a brigand of the roads into a trap.

Given a day or so to rummage in her attic and crammed cellars, Maeragha can produce a huge variety of false noses, prostheses, and body paddings for clients desiring that 'extra special effect.' She's also a devastatingly good mimic who can be hired to give expert, enthusiastic vocal performances so long as she can remain unseen.

### **Steeleye's Armory and Smithy**



Gruff old Angar "Steeleye" Axeson is a scarred veteran of the Reclamation Wars. He greets customers with a keen left eye and a smooth, staring steel right eye (a war trophy of sorts, though he'd prefer to have his own glaring right eye back). This



dwarf warrior is a smith of the first rank. He works slowly and charges a fifth more than most to make armor or weaponry, but he can match the work of others—even ancient elven-make—in appearance and quality. He also produces exceptional work of his own and can alter or repair items to fit or work perfectly.

He growls and complains about the carelessness of his clients and their mistreatment of great work, but has been known to work day and night through to get something ready in time for an adventurer going into known danger. If strangers try to get him to drop work in progress in favor of their own wants, he tends to work more slowly and be very difficult—some would say openly hostile.

For all that, Tethyrian nobles swear by his work, and many of them drop off handsome payments with the request to “do thus and so at leisure, perhaps to be ready a year from now.” They know that in return for such patience, what they receive will be of the very finest quality.

Long ago, a noble died of natural causes while waiting for a Steeleye blade, and the gruff dwarf tramped uninvited into the funeral ceremony. He wordlessly handed top quality blades to all three of the man’s grieving sons and gave a dagger to his widow, for which he would take no payment.

I know several blustering adventurers who treat Steeleye with more awe and respect than they give to kings.

### **Taluth’s Shrewd Flight**



Nhalbert Taluth was once a captain of archers in Cormyr, and thereafter a mercenary marksman-for-hire. His arrows slew more than a dozen noble targets before the Vilhon became too warm in its welcome for him to tarry there longer.

He accompanied a caravan west, and in a running battle against brigands fell under a wagon racing along at full speed, before it crashed, crushing his leg.

Taluth survived that battle by firing his remaining shafts so shrewdly that no brigand dared approach, and the surviving caravan merchants were able to rally around where he lay. But a man with a pegleg can’t creep around in cover as archers must if they go to war, so Taluth retired to this pleasantly wooded town to make arrows and thereby earn a living.

His shop stands next to a forgettable hot-bun shop in the angle formed by the meeting of Sairnor Street and the southerly end of Fal-lowfern Lane. The visitor today will find a small array of the very best bows and bowstrings, and several hundred quivers of superior shafts. For the quality of his wares,



Taluth's prices are a bargain, and many merchants pick up a twenty-one arrow quiver on their every pass through Mosstone, knowing they'll be able to readily sell such fine arrows.

Taluth gets his wood from certain copses in the forest not far east of town. There are rumors that he's had the aid of elven magic in training his saplings to grow so straight and true.

### Uncrimmon's Trophies & Sundries



Nestled against the west town wall in a little dogleg offshoot of Carldeir Lane, this dark shop has a tall oval door the hue of old blood, and it acquires an eerily beckoning green glow after dark. Outside is a tiny sign, and inside are few patrons.

Those who do venture in are apt to have the look of adventurers, for Uncrimmon's buys and sells its wares from such folk, as well as to alchemists, mages, and journeyman priests. The walls of the shop are lined with shelves and what look like sloping open coffins. The former hold ranks of large bottles, and the latter display human skeletons (not, despite wild local tales, undead or animated shop guardians). The human bones are for sale, and so are the contents of the bottles: bones of more exotic origins and all manner of pickled

beast body parts, from whole bats to illithid tentacles.

Ardreth Ulnshoor, a creepy, wooden-faced old man who seems able to read minds, runs the shop. Locals swear he's really a mind flayer who's let his disguise slip during one or two robbery attempts, but several Harpers confided to me that he's a doppelganger who employs a *medallion of ESP* and sleep-poisoned blowdarts to give himself the upper hand on patrons. His false "illithid shape" is a deterrent he uses when threatened. The Harpers let Ardreth remain here because, unbeknownst to him, the *medallion* was enchanted to allow Harper mages nearby to "tune in" to what it's reading whenever Ardreth uses it.

Though the doppelganger is mainly concerned with detecting and foiling would-be thieves and those who'd swindle him with fakes, he likes to get to know his clients and always indulges in a little probing.

Uncrimmon's is the place to get sleeping potions, poisons and their antidotes, rare (living) spiders, genuine tarrasque teeth, spirit naga venom, tiny mimics, sahuagin scales, and other components. Nothing is inexpensive, but neither is the shop unguarded. Two "from the waist up" helmed horrors float menacingly above the entrance inside, and they hover above moving shoppers, swords ready in



both hands at all times. Their eyes glow in silent menace, and according to locals the eyes emit a variety of spells.

Certain powerful wizards who've tried seizing things from Uncrimmon's have regretted it in an immediate and fatal fashion. Something in the shop can hurl (or reflect) powerful magic.

So much all Mosstone knows. Let it be my proud duty to lay before readers here, for the first time, the results of my sleuthings. The floating, disembodied human eye and hand that often assists Ardreth is the true owner of the shop. Or rather, the instrument through which he works.

"Uncrimmon" is a spell-using beholder who frequents the forest near Mosstone. By means of magic he operates this "handeye" from a distance. The eye tyrant can see, speak, and hear through it, cast spells so they emerge out of its palm or fingers. It can animate the hand to carry, strangle, clutch, or even wield weapons—clumsily, unless the blade is very small and light, such as the razor-sharp knife it seems to favor. The doppelganger serves and fears the beholder, though how they came to work together, and what their purposes are in remaining in business here remain mysteries to me. Perhaps they keep watch over adventurers for others. . . .

## Prince Piiclar's Road

This is a local name for the Trade Way between Port Kir and Zazesspur. Piiclar was a famous prince of the Strohm Dynasty who loved fishing and traveled often between his seat at Zazesspur and his favorite town of Port Kir.

The Prince's Road is heavily patrolled by brightblades, sixteen-horse bands of mounted armsmen sent out of Zazesspur at least six times a day, except in the worst storms of winter. These men are usually expert lancers and slingers and fair crossbowmen. Their horses are trained to follow the called commands of a hierarchy of soldiers: their rider, then an over-sword or other officer, and then an additional officer. Riders can thus leap from their horses while they remain stationary.

Despite the brightblades, brigands lurk on mountain trails that overlook the Prince's Road as it passes through the Starspires, and some pose as caravan travelers themselves. Such miscreants often manage to steal horses or lashed-down goods at the back and less-guarded areas of caravan trains. They disappear into places in the mountains reachable only on foot, where the prudent dare not follow. Frequent fogs in the Starspires provide these thieves with a concealing cloak.

Some merchants strap "sacrificial goods" of little value to the sides



of their trailing wagons, while others hire adventurers to ride among the barrels and coffers of the last wagon, ready to burst forth and give battle.

Aside from the Starspires, the countryside through which this busy stretch of road passes is gently rolling, lightly forested farmland, often with stone and stump fences. As one travels south, these boundaries increasingly become tall, tangled hedgerows.

## **The Trade Way**

Although the coastal road linking Calimshan with Waterdeep and points north is collectively and formally known as the Trade Way, Locals use that term only for the stretch linking Trademeet with Mosstone. The northern reach of this journey plunges into the green depths of the Wealdath and is haunted by leucrotta, various unfriendly sylvan folk (including both elven archers and ogres), and, of course, by brigands.

Few travel the "forest run" unarmed, and most merchants prefer to move in large groups under the protection of hired steel. Anyone who lights a fire while in the Wealdath will attract an instant flight of elven arrows. This volley

indicates that the elves of the Forest of Tethir, unseen in the trees, shadow every caravan or traveler along the Trade Way; eventually, elven magic will quench the flames. Fire-kindlers are harried by arrows until they hurry out of the forest in either direction.

Trade Way guards are mercenaries hired at Port Kir or Mosstone as armed travel escorts, usually for 4 gold pieces each per day (5 if no food is provided), or double that for overland travel away from the cleared roads. If they collude with brigands, hireswords are executed—usually by means that involve prolonged pain, such as having their joints broken and then being pinioned where they are trodden on, or being bound, having their skins slashed open, and then being doused with salt. Several local mages and priests of Shaundakul specialize in spell-aided interrogations and frequent, covert scryings of thoughts to ferret out any such skullduggery.

Despite these efforts, a "Trade Way guard" long since became Tethyrian slang for a fair-weather friend, only around when there's money or something of interest to be had.



# The Wealdath



housands of mysteries and marvels lie hidden in the gloom beneath the trees in the Forest of Tethyr. A

minstrel can spend an entire lifetime gathering tales of the Unspoiled Woods, and still not hear them all. More than one man has tried, but none have even started to learn the lore of the elves who dwell in the depths of this forest, named for one of their heroes. The information that follows is what I could glean from the folk of Tethyr,

and from some veteran adventurers who've traveled in the Wealdath and lived to see open land again.

The current court of Tethyr is said to be friendly to elves, and there are rumors of an elven queen in this forest who might warily return such friendship. But there have been centuries of strife and bloodshed between humans and elves, ever since Tethyrian humans blamed the elves for the death of their beloved King Errilam of Tethyr while on a forest hunt in the Year of the Beholder, 1277 DR.





Anyone who thinks this is all "old dust history" is reminded of the Battle of the Burning, some twenty years ago, wherein an adventuring band decided to expand the valley they'd retired to by burning back the forest. All of them died, along with every local farmer and every last sheep, hog, and ox. Sorcerous rain clouds remained over the smoldering trees for months, and all of the human corpses and their livestock were left for others to find, bristling with arrows. Overbold foresters who find an elven trail leading through the Shield will almost always come upon a warning: a human skeleton held by magic high on a dead tree, sporting a spray of elven arrows and glowing an eerie blue-green in darkness.

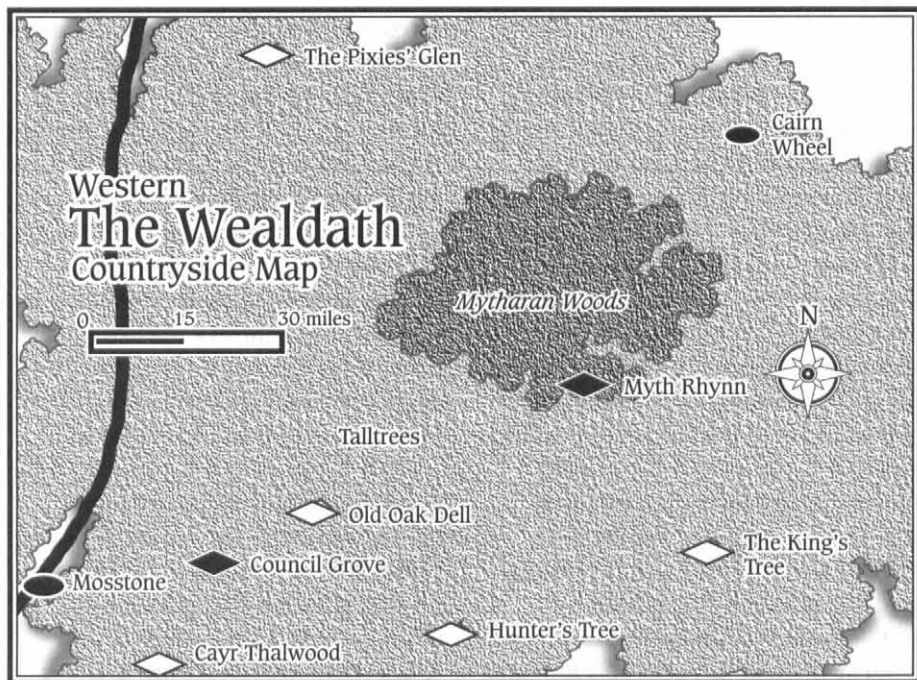
The Shield is a nigh-impenetrable west wall of close-packed duskwoods and shadowtops, thorn-brambles, and poisonous glow-fungi. They ooze mindlessly and slowly along the rotting branches of the forest floor, bringing on a sickness in many humans who so much as brush against them. The wall stands about four miles deep along the western edge of the forest, with lesser barriers along the northern and southern edges of the forest. These have been deliberately planted and cultivated by the Sy'Tel'Quessir elves of the Wealdath to keep human foresters and loggers from penetrating into the heart of their realm. Human activity in the

forest today is confined to what elves refer to as "upsun" growth: those areas beyond the Shield. There, the forest is expanding by itself, sunlight is plentiful, and birds and small forest beasts are numerous.

Larger and more dangerous forest inhabitants, including ogres, gnolls, bugbears, giant spiders, wolves, satyrs, fauns, sprites, brownies, and even centaurs, dwell deeper in the Wealdath. They often emerge into upsun areas to hunt.

Only a few elf trails pass through the Shields, and these are never willingly revealed to humans. Barely noticeable to human rangers and druids, they have no names and often combine ground level and "uppertree" travel, running along and leaping from branch to branch. Uppertree routes cross over bogs, thorn-thickets, and beast lairs that the ground routes lead into, only to fade out in the very heart of danger. Swing-log rams and deadfalls are favorite trail traps.

The intruder into the Wealdath should not be surprised to discover many clearings in its depths, or the presence of lycanthropes, wyverns, perytons, and even dragons. Forest lore holds persistent rumors of elven shapeshifters who appear and vanish in the heart of the forest, and of elven arrows that hunt their chosen prey like darting wasps, following and lurking for hours and miles. To humans, this is, and probably always will be, wild country.



## Cairn Wheel

Just inside the forest southeast of Brost, this ancient stone circle was once used by local druids worshipping Silvanus. A druid slain by bandits in the circle over a century ago uttered the Thorncall with his dying breath, and the hundred-yard-diameter circle of stones is now surrounded by an impenetrable barrier of thorns. The skeletons of Sklaerh Tholone, the dead druid, and his four slayers lie undisturbed, aside from a little forest deadfall, in the clear center of the circle. It is said that the bodies of the brigands bear much wealth, and the druid holds magics consecrated to Silvanus. But anyone attempting to

remove these without the blessing of the Oak-Father risks death, and worse.

## Cayr Thalwood

This simple stone tower, from which runs a small circular forecourt wall, encloses a stables and herb garden. It stands on a heavily-wooded knoll in the forest 30 miles southeast of Mosstone. A winding but clear and monster-prowled trail links it to that town.

For more than twenty years Thalwood was the primary base of the adventurers known as the Company of Eight. It is kept serviceable by a number of resident druids from Mosstone, and from several



hundred humans there, along the edge of the Wealdath bordering the Trade Way, and along the trail linking Mosstone and Thalwood. When Duke Llanistaph of Suretmarch (Lord Just Chancellor of Tethyr, and formerly a hero of the Company) can get away for some hunting or quiet time, this is his favored retreat.

## **Council Glade**

Destroyed in 1364 DR, this former meeting place of the Elmanesse has now been partially reclaimed by the forest, its burnt-out and ruined treehouses crawling with ivy and new growth. A mad elf by the name of Buttorwyr dwells in these ruins, guarding their treasures from defilers—specifically, any humans he sees. He's an expert archer who lurks on high branches and stealthily strikes down foes, preferring to put his shafts through eyes or faces whenever possible. Some young elves have taken to calling the glade itself Buttorwyr, and to human foresters, it's Hauntarrows.

The Council Glade lies a half-day's walk east from Mosstone. A spring wells up at its north end to fill a pool. Minor elven magics lie unrecovered on elven remains in the vicinity of the glade: enchanted daggers, rings, and a few figurines that can be made to emit spells. Buttorwyr guards a small heap of such goods that he's gathered from within the glade itself. There are no owlbeats within a day's travel of the

glade, because the mad elf developed a taste for their flesh and hunts them relentlessly, ranging far in search of his favored delicacy.

## **The Eight's Tree**

Used sporadically by Mirthal Aendryr, the Duke of Durmista, as his court, manor, and guesthouse, this onetime hidden stronghold of the famous Company of Eight adventuring band stands in the southeastern Wealdath between Suldanessellar and the Moonglade. Though it's unlikely humans will find it except by dumb luck or through use of an experienced guide, no elf will attack humans venturing to or from it.

The Eight's Tree is a huge, many-branched oak. Many chambers, linked by smooth-walled stair-pasages, are hollowed out within it, and these connect to extensive granary and armory cellars beneath the tree. Travelers can expect food and quiet welcome from the aged elves who serve as a staff here. But if they seem hostile to the growing forest, elven peace, or the ducal rule, they may find themselves facing some harsh and direct questions down the length of elven arrows.

## **Hunter's Tree**

This site stands as a "go no further" mark for foresters who dwell along the southwestern edges of the Wealdath. Beyond it, elven arrows or the



claws and jaws of beasts will bring them death, later or more likely sooner. The Hunter's Tree is a shadowtop that stands at the northern end of a long north-south scar in the forest. An ancient forest fire there burned away trees and caused a rock outcrop to shatter. The spilled boulders have made regrowth slow and stunted, keeping the scar open.

A human skeleton stands pinned to the trunk of the Hunter's Tree by a score of arrows. These are the mortal remains of Lord Dinos Akhmelere of Kirgrove, a notorious hunter of elves during the last days of the Tethyr dynasty. He fled through the forest during the Ten Black Days to this doom. Nothing else of interest is to be found here; the site serves only as a landmark.

The Tree stands southwest of the Thalwood trail, at about the point where a griffon flying straight east from Kirgard and a griffon flying true to the southeast from Mosstone would meet in midair.

Two adventuring bands are said to have buried treasure near the Hunter's Tree. The Striking Talons of Memnon and the all-female Fallowgar's Furies haven't been seen for almost a decade and are presumed to have perished in the Wealdath. If these tales are true, the treasure would include elven magic and perhaps coins or gems accumulated by the adventurers while exploring the forest.

## **Kalmin's Grove**

North of the headwaters of Hawkwing's Brook is a small, inviting grove at the forest's edge, now uninhabited, but a favorite overnight camping-spot for wayfarers and herb-gatherers. It boasts three pools of cool, drinkable water and many herbs growing wild but in profusion. This was once a gathering-place for many local druids.

Kalmin Ithal was a young druid who saved three children of his kin from the Ithal Slaughter. He died of wounds suffered in the doing, soon after getting the children to safety in the arms of his fellow druids here. His remains are buried under the roots of a now-great oak with his mark, an acorn diagonally crossed by a bird's feather, still visible on the tree trunk.

## **The King's Tree**

Among the many secrets elves have not yet shared with the humans of Tethyr is the true tale of the King's Tree, related to me by a dying elf-mage after I, ah, misled him about being in the employ of Candlekeep.

There is a small glade in rolling woodlands of the deep forest, somewhere a little west of where arrows magically sent from Myth Rhynn, Talltrees, and the western shore of Nebulae Pool would meet.

A single massive oak stands alone in the clearing. It lacks side-limbs, its massive trunk rising smooth and cylindrical like a castle turret. It is,



the elves believe, the transformed body of the ancient Tethyrian Druid-King Strohm the Fifth. The glade is sacred to both Silvanus and Rillifane Rallathil. Many manifestations of power that aid or heal sylvan beings and protect them and all green and growing things are known to have occurred on the rare instances when intruders found this remote place. Devout worshipers of Silvanus and Rillifane, and beings who have worked to defend Tethyr or the Wealdath, have also sometimes been aided. Anyone who sleeps in or near the glade receives cryptic but clear visions in their dreams.

The last of the Tethyrian monarchs to see this site was the Druid-King's granddaughter, Queen Sybille the Great, who deliberately slept there alone to try to learn from the visions she'd receive. She was found at dawn clinging to a high bough of a duskwood at the edge of the glade, having shredded her garments away and clawed her own skin, yet sleeping peacefully. She shared her visions with no one.

The dying elf-mage (who gave his name only as "Loosetongue," an obvious, biting pseudonym) told me that the Rhindaun Dynasty shall be told of the glade and admitted into the peaceful presence of this king of land and forest, should they prove worthy of the elves' trust.

## Moonglade

In the southeastern reaches of the Wealdath is a seedling forest where not so long ago foresters serving the Knights of the Shield logged the forest bare. Since that time, this area has been reclaimed by the elves with the armed aid of Queen Amlaruil of Evermeet. She sent a contingent of sixteen veteran warriors and four mages to occupy the loggers' stronghouse and patrol the area to keep creatures, especially humans, from despoiling the forest.

The waist-high seedlings of the Moonglade occupy much of the old County Suldell. The elves have been surprised but thankful to gain help in both their defensive and reforestation efforts from their human neighbor to the east. The new Count of Spellshire aids in the effort to plant and cultivate trees and woodland plants.

By decree, humans of Tethyr may not enter this area. Heavy fines and imprisonment are the least of fates awaiting intruders hailing from other lands. Those who dig up, break down, or burn trees may expect swift death without benefit of trial.

The Moonglade's name is derived from its crescent shape and because the adventuress Arilyn Moonblade aided the elves in reclaiming the land.



## Myth Rhynn

Even to approach this ancient, overgrown ruin makes a Sy'Tel'Quessir elf sick. Its failing, twisted mythal (magical field) affects elves horribly. According to them, the mythal has corrupted all of the forest now known as the Mytharan Woods. I've seen Myth Rhynn only in spell-spun images crafted by Loosetongue, who said his fleeing life "left him no more to fear from its crawling taint," and I can report only what he told me.

Myth Rhynn's founding is older than even the elves remember. In ancient times, it was the Tomb City of Keltormir, where elven heroes were laid to rest in elaborate sepulchers and shrines, kept from rising into undeath by the mythal. Guardians and gardeners tended the places of the dead and were the only beings to dwell here. (Many humans and forest beasts have found their ways to the Tomb City since and now roam its cracked and overgrown lanes as undead.)

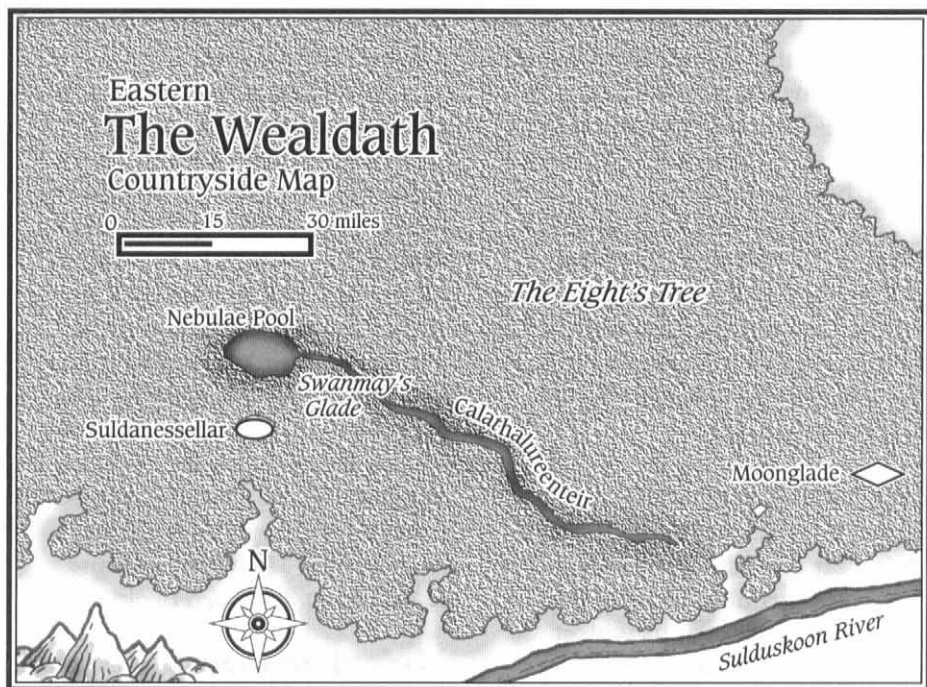
Great treasures lie here, to be sure. The finery of the dead and their personal magics, many of these being enspelled gems and objects of great beauty, are still entombed with those who bore them. No elf will guide anyone here, though, and the mythal prevents all translocational magics (*teleport* spells, for example) from operating within Myth Rhynn, and similar travel into or out of it.

Nor is it unguarded. Will-o-wisps haunt the western reaches of the ruined city, seeming to avoid something else: a mysterious, spell-hurling undead mage or other entity who consists of a skull and skeletal arms that return, over time, even after being shattered. This flying wraithlike thing can command all of the zombies and skeletons of Myth Rhynn, and it seeks to slay all intruders after capturing any magic they carry. If the magic consists of memorized spells, the intruder is caught in a cage of clutching undead while the entity slowly plunders its mind with spells, draining its life force, intellect, and memorized magic together.

The only intruders known to have escaped alive from the depths of Myth Rhynn are adventurers that the entity, "Mallin," sends back into Faerûn to find magic it learned about from earlier victims—missions that must be fulfilled if captives taken from the adventurers' ranks are to be released alive. Mallin is known to have cheated some who have served him, killing them and the captives upon their return. He is thought by some to be able to call on the mythal to allow him to teleport around within the Tomb City.

Myth Rhynn consists of many-spired, splendid tombs that line broad avenues radiating like the spokes of a wagon wheel. At the center is a fountain that bubbles up





at the heart of a clear, untainted circular pool perhaps 100 feet across. Lanes cross the avenues, surrounding the fountain in concentric circles, the outermost of which curves perhaps a mile out from the fountain.

Black, stunted trees have grown everywhere, cloaking the city in a dark canopy, shattering the tombs they've erupted through and throwing limbs that are twisted into grotesque, clawlike shapes everywhere. Most of the avenues are choked with tangled boughs thicker than warhorses.

Everything except the central fountain, its knee-high stone rim-rail, and a few flagstones around

the fountain is covered in a thick growth of clinging ivy and ground-flowers—crawling vines that sprout vivid red and purple flowers seen nowhere else. The perfume of these blossoms induces sleep, and when the vines are cut, they ooze or spray a purple sap. This causes the skins of humans to swell into grotesque, weeping growths. It also half-blinds them and affects balance and precision, making limbs tremble and fingers rubbery. If burned, the vines give off a choking, poisonous smoke, but their dampness soon reduces any blaze to a lazy smoldering.

Worms and beetles seem to be the only creatures that flourish in



the mythal. Loosetongue was decidedly not of the opinion that humans should travel to the Tomb City to either cleanse it or try for its treasure. "All such fools might accomplish, besides their own undoubtedly horrible deaths," he told me, "would be to free and unleash more undead horrors from within tombs now safely sealed. Let adventurers die elsewhere, enrich the soil in quiet peace, and thus accomplish more."

## Mytharan Woods

There is a dark heart of the Wealdath that even the elves avoid. It is a roughly circular area perhaps forty miles across at its widest point, whose western fringes are about the same distance east of the Trade Way. The oldest, tallest, and most thickly grown trees in all the forest stand here, thickly cloaked in fungi that thrive in the endless gloom.

Lurking magics left over from long-ago Keltormir, notably the ruins of Myth Rhynn, cause many odd happenings hereabouts. Legends say that giant beasts and monsters, wild magics that burst forth spontaneously, and *gates* to other lands and worlds can be found here. A few satyr settlements dot the fringes of the Mytharan Woods, but even those wild creatures do not venture far into its wild depths. Monsters therein, according to those few satyrs who trade and talk

with humans, range from fomorian giants to will-o-wisps.

A particular deep blue color of glossy silk and similar fabrics is known as Mytharan Blue. It's so named for the glows that have been seen on moonless nights reaching toward the stars from within this dangerous region. One harmless sort of fungi mimics the appearance of the heads of any humans and half-humans it absorbs after they die of other causes. Any traveler who suddenly gazes into the sightless eyes of a head made out of cheeselike greenish-white fungus has reached Mytharan soil, and would do well to turn back.

## Nebulae Pool

The elven name of this forest lake at the northwestern end of Swanmay's Glade translates roughly as "Pool of Stars." It is so named not because its placid waters mirror the stars at night, though they do so spectacularly, at about the time that the phantoms of long-dead elven ladies begin to dance above the waters. At highsun, when the light is brightest, crystals embedded in the rocks of the lake bottom reflect sunlight back out in bright flashes.

Naebrulae Athtrilan was a human explorer who found the lake long ago, which is why it alone, of the many small lakes in the Wealdath, appears on maps. Over time, his name was shortened and



corrupted, leaving the lake with its present name.

Naebrulae claimed to have seen a high-backed, ornate throne sitting upright in the depths of the lake—a throne that sank down into the bottom as he watched, only to rise again hours later. He believed that the lake must be a sacred place, with the throne placed there by a god, perhaps to confer special powers on anyone who sat on it. Or perhaps the throne is the entrance to some sort of flooded, ancient stronghold, city or tomb, or perhaps a wizard's home underlies the lake, he mused. No one since has seen the throne, but interestingly, local elves refuse to deny its existence. They say only, "The time must be right."

A small, bare island at the center of the Nebulae Pool was once the home of a swanmay, for which Swanmay's Glade is named. But she is either long since dead or has simply moved on. The lake water is cool, clear, and a trifle sweet—eminently drinkable.

## Old Oak Dell

This major holy site of Silvanus is roughly a day's travel east from Mosstone. Used only during the full moon, the perfectly circular glade is almost a mile in diameter, with an incomplete ring of eleven oaks surrounding a large pool at its center. These oaks are allegedly the past Archdruids of Mosstone, or

settlements predating Mosstone, and the waters of the pool are said to contain *gates* that connect to the home planes of Eldath and Silvanus.

The Dryad Dance held here has kept the central forest healthy and vibrant for centuries after this area was cleared by dragonfire millennia ago. When the druids of Tethyr and Amn converge on this site, the sylvan races do so as well, and major worship services sometimes are attended by more than three hundred beings!

At such times, the risen power of the Oak-Father can be felt as a roiling in the air, and all living creatures within it tingle and feel awake, alive, and alert. Humans find their senses of smell, sight, and hearing augmented greatly for about a day after the ritual's end. Those who "give blood to the forest" during worship, wounding themselves and letting the blood drip to the forest floor, often find themselves cured of diseases, curses, or parasitic infestations. Others are easily able to resist such perils in the immediate future.

## The Pixies' Glen

A few miles inside the Shield, heading due southeast from Trademeet, is a small, bare hillock rising from the center of a perfectly round glade. Local Trademeet legends say pixies and other sylvans dance here on nights when the moon is full,



and some farmers nearby say walking around it thrice under the light of the full moon will send you to other worlds.

Others call such chatter "the worst sort of wild nonsense, look ye, because if every armed idiot or crazed mage was to disturb the forest folk trying it, what would they do to us, eh? If they stormed forth and tore apart Trademeet, who would stop them?"

Some say the hill is bare because it's only a thin cloak of earth over the gigantic stone tomb of a long-ago king of the giants. Others say it's no giant-work, but a human castle, collapsed into a heap after being knocked down one night by enraged giants, with all its inhabitants and their wealth inside.

No foresters work in this area—not since determined efforts to breach the Shield led to a large band of woodcutters being torn apart by treants who'd moved to stand over the stumps of recently-cut trees. All trace of the inroads their axes had made has been erased.

## **Suldanessellar**

Sy'Tel'Quessir elves do not have houses as humans do, though they may use ruined or abandoned human structures. The boughs of trees are their sleeping-places, and they may hide or shelter belongings in a dozen or more spots scattered around a favored area of forest. This city of the Wealdath elves con-

sists of twenty skillfully hollowed-out, still-living trees. Rope bridges and branches tied and trained to weave together link the trees, which thrive through careful elven pruning and root-feeding. No habitable chamber of Suldanessellar is closer to the ground than 50 feet aloft. Most are far higher, the loftiest being about 300 feet up—and apt to be frequently dampened by forest mists.

So few are the surviving elves of the Forest of Tethir after centuries of human hunting and battles against orcs and forest monsters that there is room for all Wealdath elves here, and traditional rivalries have been largely set aside by the elves in the interests of survival. Both Dukes of the Wealdath have their own tree-homes in Suldanessellar, though the city actually lies in Durmista, miles east of Noromath. Duke Allain Kevanarial of Noromath is the exceptional archer known as "Foxfire" who rules the Elmanesse elves of western Wealdath as Bowlord of Her Majesty's Bowmen. Duke Mirthal Aendryr of Durmista, Scoutlord of Her Majesty's Scouts, leads the Suldusk families. The elves care little for human territorial designations, however.

The real ruler of Suldanessellar, if it can be said to have one, is Treespeaker Rathomir, a tall, dignified priest of Rillifane. Unfortunately for human traders, he is the



very model of stubbornness and traditional elven arrogance.

Visitors to Swanmay's Glade, in which the tree-city of Suldanessellar stands, are advised to speak softly, make no threatening gestures or actions, and act humbly. Expert elven archers are everywhere, vigilance is unceasing on any intruder, and the ways up into the city are kept hidden and secret for a reason. The elves dare not trust humans or other outsiders if they are to survive. They will kill, and kill swiftly, to preserve the safety of this last stand of their people.

## **Swanmay's Glade**

This pleasant area of small groves and grassy knolls is crossed by many clear, babbling brooks that feed into Nebulae Pool at its northwestern end. It's no longer a glade, as all trace of the ancient forest fire that cleared trees to make a glade here is gone. Nor is it home to any known swanmays.

Its southwestern edge is home to the closest thing in the Wealdath to an elven city: Suldanessellar, from which strong and well-armed patrols keep close watch over the area, slaying or turning away all monsters and goblinkin. The glade extends a long way southeast, along the banks of the largest stream to feed the Pool, known to the elves as the Calathalureenteir.

Calathalureene was a human sorceress of ancient times who

dwelt somewhere along its banks and often aided the elves against marauding orcs with her spells.

Intruders are not really welcome here, but some elves have come to hold the view that if humans are going to blunder into the Wealdath attempting to trade, they might as well be met here. And if they come to steal or slay, the Glade is as good a place to kill them as any. Traders who dare to come to the Glade usually camp along the banks of the Calathalureenteir, well away from Suldanessellar, and they wait for elves to come to them, lighting no fires during their stay.

They report that the elves desire finely made metal needles, fastenings buckles and clasps, pans, bowls, and weapons; cheeses, and durable, fine-woven fabrics in hues found in nature. In return, they trade fresh and ground forest herbs; edible forest mushrooms; delectable sweet jellies made from certain plants and leaves; potent berry wines; and a flavorful paste or spread.

This "Wealdathar" is made from certain crushed and ground roots and berries, the flesh of quail and other forest fowl, and smoked forest meats. Though I suspect it contains ingredients that many humans would gag at (such as snake, bog-frogs, and rotfungus), Wealdathar is nourishing and tastes very good. Some merchants prefer it, spread on bread or biscuits with a little salt



and pepper, to all other foods. I know of no human coming to harm from eating it, but there are some folk who swear it contains some secret ingredient that elven mages can use to control the bodies of anyone who's ever eaten Wealdathar. If so, the mages seem to be waiting for some future occasion to wield such power.

## Talltrees

This former treetop village of the Elmanesse elven tribe consisted of carefully blended dwellings and swinging walkways high up in the trees, utterly invisible from view to anyone not standing on the ground in the heart of the settlement. The notorious mercenary captain Bunlap and his hirelings destroyed it in their attempts to kill the elves of Tethir in 1364 DR.

While its tall, hollowed-out trees and huts are scorched and abandoned by the elves for now, the forest will heal itself, and the elves will probably reclaim Talltrees when their numbers are replenished. Parts of some of the highest dwellings survived the worst of the flames, and Duke Kevanarial sometimes uses these to meet with elves and other sylvan beings. The traveler today will find several ponds of drinkable water, edible berries in profusion at the right time of year,

and small game in plenty. There is nothing else to interest the traveler here, and forest predators tend to prowl the area to make their own meals of the game.

## Zoastria's Stand

Just inside the treeline of the easternmost part of the Wealdath, where the upsun saplings begin, is a small grove of trees younger than the surrounding forest. This is Zoastria's Stand, named for the blue-haired silver elven warrior who returned out of legend to help and free the elves. Here, the elves battled the forces of Bunlap, and here Zoastria fell one final time, bequeathing her moonblade to Arilyn Moonblade.

All that remains from the battle today are a few scars on tree trunks, and a handful of moss- and ivy-overgrown skeletons where the elves left their foes to rot and feed the forest scavengers.

Foresters occasionally use the Stand as a landmark or message- or goods-exchange place, typically burying goods at an agreed-upon spot in the Stand. Others, from human lovers to doppelgangers and agents of secretive organizations, use it to meet and confer. It offers the wayfarer water and edible fungi—as well as some very poisonous toadstools—but nothing more.





# Volo's Guide to BALDUR'S GATE II

**Ed Greenwood**

*Jack D. Knight*

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